とある魔術の禁書目録SS

－『必要悪の教会』特別編入試験編－

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―『必要悪の教会(ネセサリウス)』特別編入試験編―

第1章

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CHAPTER 1

Part 1

“The Amakusa Christian Church, as its name suggests, is a Christian force that originated in Shimabara of Japan’s Kyushu region.

They looked to the mystical for concrete methods of escaping the oppression of the shogunate that governed the nation at the time. That desire colored what form of practical magical organization they became.

Due to the nature of their history, both creating strong bonds with a nation or government and large scale evangelism were not an option like they were in Europe. However, they found religious symbolism in the objects and wordings allowed of them in their state of oppression. Their method of spreading information was to do so in forms only those with the proper knowledge could understand. This method was created from a sort of Galapagos syndrome, but it was in violation of the methodology of the original Christian church. For that reason…”

As he read through the tiny letters printed on a bundle of paper, the number of wrinkles on Tatemiya Saiji’s brow grew. Once that number exceeded its limit, he threw the large bundle of paper into the air, stretched his arms toward the ceiling, and let out a high-pitched shout.

“Fwooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!”

“S-substitute pontiff!! I know we have been over this countless times already, but please stop acting so oddly! There are other ways to handle the stress and pressure!!”

A girl named Itsuwa who belonged to the same organization frantically tried to calm him down as the manuscript rained down like white feathers after a large flock of doves took flight.

It was early September.

They were in a hotel on the outskirts of the British capital of London.

However, just because Tatemiya Saiji and Itsuwa were in the same room did not mean they were in the sort of “adult relationship” tabloids loved so much.

More than ten men and women both young and old filled that space that was so small it would have received complaints even as a student apartment. They were sitting everywhere they could find a place: the chair, the bed, the side table, the windowsill, the small refrigerator, the bathtub, and even the shelves in the closet.

Just a few days earlier in their home country of Japan, the Amakusa Church had caused a great uproar over the nun Orsola Aquinas and the grimoire known as the Book of the Law. They had been forced to flee to England. They did not regret what they had done, but the world was not so kind that it would all go smoothly.

In this case…

"Honestly. If we cannot prove our usefulness and legitimacy at the information meeting, the Anglican Church might refuse to accept us, remember? If that happens, we will be back to a life on the run from the Roman Catholic Church and its two billion followers across the world. If you do not want to regret any failings in the details of our manuscript, we need to check over it one last time now!"

"Yeah, but…" Tatemiya looked up at the stain-covered ceiling as if he were leaning his entire life up against the creaking back of his chair. "I feel like giving all this formal explanation is making it harder to get the information across. It's all being deflected by those annoying barriers."

"I-I see…"

"What really matters is grabbing the audience's attention! Making full use of the time we have to make a great appeal for our case is important, but we need to start by tearing down those barriers!!"

This was a situation where pulling out a slipper, slapping him on the head with it, and telling him to get to work would have sufficed, but Itsuwa's softheartedness prevented her from doing so.

Itsuwa began thinking seriously on the topic. She had heard that, in international debates, the actual content of a speech was less important than the body language and acting very self-important. She also thought it was more Amakusa-like because they would add mystical meanings to ordinary walking methods and breathing rhythms.

However…

"And that is why I think Itsuwa should immediately change into this female teacher set (780 pounds for top, bottom, and accessories)."

"Bfh!? Wh-what do you mean a female teacher set!? I highly doubt the PTA or the board of education endorses that!!"

"It's Japanese style!!"

“What do an office jacket and a tight skirt have to do with Japanese culture!?”

Itsuwa protested in a high-pitched voice similar to a cat with its fur all standing on end, but she heard whispering voices spreading around her.

“But I don’t think a female teacher fits that stereotype in the West.”

“They have the guys play football, have the girls be cheerleaders, and hold dance parties in the school gym. It’s a completely different worldview.”

Tatemiya then shouted, “None of that matters! We’ll make it work!! Itsuwa, you just have to stay silent and use your arms to accentuate your breasts! If you don’t, you’ll be wasting valuable resources!!”

“What are you trying to do here, substitute pontiff!?”

“You can’t tell!? We don’t care what happens as long as it’s fun!!”

As Tatemiya blatantly deviated from the task at hand, a woman named Tsushima who had fluffy blonde hair took off one of her slippers and held it in one hand.

She swung it down toward Tatemiya’s head, intentionally missed completely, and slammed the heel of the slipper into his crotch like she was playing Menko.

“Vah!? Bhaaahh!! Agaogh…”

“We are prepared enough for the information meeting, but there is still the other way of showing our usefulness.”

Tsushima winked as she spoke and ignored Tatemiya Saiji’s completely serious reaction.

She then mentioned a major event about to begin.

“The special entrance exam for the Anglican Church’s 0th Parish of Necessarius. …If we do not pass that, they will not think they can use us.”

Part 2

At 7 PM, the sky above the streets of London was filled with stars and the air had grown a bit chilly. Unlike in Japan, the souvenir shops locked their doors early as if to say, “If I’m closing, I’m closing. Who cares about the tourists?” The businessmen in suits were moving toward the bars fairly quickly.

This place contained one of the world's leading stock exchanges that single-handedly carried the financial products of the EU, but it maintained an odd balance by also using its own currency, the pound, for the lifeblood of its economy rather than the euro. With their brick buildings and stone paving, the streets maintained the look of "the good old days", but high-speed internet lines spread out like a spider web so stock sales could be carried out in units of a ten thousandth of a second. It may have been a side effect of this that London had even more surveillance cameras than New York. Unlike the purely scientific Academy City or the entirely religious Rome and Vatican City, London had a unique scenery that contained electronic light as well as darkness lurking in holes that light did not reach.

But at the same time…

Something went unnoticed by the stylishly dressed "successful ones" who were headed to dispel their resentments with a bit of alcohol after an exhausting day of reading detailed numbers.

As they walked comfortably through those streets, so did a certain type of people known as magicians.

Those magicians rode the same trains, ate at the next table over, and passed by on the crosswalks.

"Okay, okay. Good evening."

In the great magical country of England, an organization named Necessarius existed to handle crimes caused by those magicians and to punish those magicians while being magicians themselves. Freadia Strikers, a member of that organization, spoke in a carefree voice.

"You will now be sent to the F2 entrance to the Underground at Lambeth Station. Yes, that is the testing ground we use."

She was sitting in a building with dim, indirect lighting. It was closer to being a pub than a restaurant. The excessively large portions of the meat and potato dish seemed to suggest otherwise, but the primary draw was the alcohol.

"If you can clear this, we plan to give you the free pass. That is the key to the facilities we control. Oh, your speech at the information meeting? That is just a formality. Here at Necessarius, we will use anyone we know we can use in a fight."

Freadia wore a showy red outfit that was halfway between a suit and a dress. However, she was still young enough to be called a girl, so she did seem to stand out a bit in that pub. But England was legendary in its tolerance for drinking and smoking. One only needed to be sixteen to drink, so no one said a single word to try to stop her.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. London was the first in the world to dig subway tunnels everywhere. And that was before anyone even thought about earthquake standards. Tunnels are stacked on top of each other like mille-feuille. Yes, you would need more than your fingers to count all the unused tunnels and stations.”

Her voice was hidden by the din of everyone else in the area.

It may have been more accurate to say this was a type of chanting rather than a type of magic. People worked to pick up a specific voice out of all the noise. That meant any voice could be hidden in the background noise if people’s focus was turned from it.

“…”

She was receiving various questions and objections from a few different male and female voices.

Those voices were coming from an antique rather than a communication device. It was the size of a handbag and was covered in amber wood and velvet. It was actually an old crystal radio. The workers at the British Museum would have been tempted to kill in order to get their hands on an antique like that.

However, the crystal at the heart of the device had been swapped out for something else.

“The Underground Labyrinth. …Modern dungeons are not made in strange caves. Instead, they are covered in metal shutters and the entrance is a concrete stairway.”

She received a few more questions.

Freadia removed a knife covered in a brown sauce from her fully-cooked beef. She then pointed the silver tip of the utensil toward several photographs lying on the table in turn.

(The slightly trembling tenor is Tatemiya Saiji. The polite soprano must be Itsuwa. And not only do they already sound like native Britons, but have they even picked up the detailed intonations of London?)

She lightly poked at the crystal radio with the end of her knife.

The crystal had been replaced with a modified version of a precious metal famous for killing each of its owners. If the curse that killed people according to fate was neutralized, it could be quickly made into a convenient communication method. Then again, it was made so the deadly aspect could be immediately brought back if the balance of the tuner was intentionally thrown off.

(Tch. Those damn Asian intellectuals. How about I give you a bit more noise?)

She was a stereotypical resident of that city who absolutely hated when it was referred to as a giant of a bygone era.

Of course, she was only meant to watch over them. The curse was a secret system meant to incapacitate the Amakusas if they disappeared in the middle of the test. She was not actually supposed to harm them for her own personal reasons.

As she poked at the large dial a second and third time, Freadia pouted her lips.

A job was a job.

She stabbed into one of the potatoes with her fork and continued speaking as the Anglican Church's examiner.

"The code for the shutter is a simple numerical cipher. The entrance exam does not begin until you reach a specific point in the Underground, but you should just turn around and leave if you have difficulty here."

Part 3

Itsuwa and the rest of the Amakusas made their way inside the sealed off Underground station.

They had no communication devices, but they could hear a female voice in the center of their heads as if they were wearing headphones.

"The mission itself is simple."

The station was no longer in use, but the passageway they walked through was filled with the bright illumination of fluorescent lights. Churches connected to an entire nation were quite a bit different from them. The Amakusas viewed complete secrecy as the norm, so blatantly falsifying electricity costs like this seemed like suicide.

"Several tunnels connect to that station. They are all abandoned and the rails have been partially removed, so there is no danger of a train passing through."

The fluffy blonde-haired woman named Tsushima turned toward Itsuwa and brought her index finger up to her lips.

She was likely warning Itsuwa not to rely on the fluorescent lights.

They had to consider the possibility that the area would be wrapped in darkness as soon as the exam began.

“As Necessarius uses it, it has of course not been left unaltered. It is filled countless varieties of traps, both those that use magic and those that do not.”

It was a very unpleasant structure.

Simply having plenty of complicated, high-level, magical traps would be better. Magic could be dealt with using magic. However, when traps that did not use any magic power were mixed in, the risk of overlooking something rose.

If all the lights went out when the exam began or at some other time, that risk doubled.

“(She’s trying to scare us into losing time. I’m skeptical whether these non-magical traps are there at all.)”

The stage was an abandoned Underground station and a complex arrangement of tunnels.

That stage was filled with many traps.

Itsuwa could easily guess that the special entrance exam would test their ability to escape the labyrinth and reach a certain point within a specified amount of time.

But her guess was too naïve.

“You will now map out every path within two kilometers of that station. Yes, all of them. And not just the paths, but the locations of the traps, the danger zones, and the power supply routes too. Map out everything needed to walk safely through.”

“…”

In other words, they were not being told to evade all of the traps.

It was the opposite.

They were being told to trigger all of the traps yet survive.

“By the way, you will be scored by earning points. By that, I mean you will earn points for every item you draw on your map that is needed to ensure one’s safety. If you do not reach a certain number of points, we will unfortunately not be able to accept you.”

“That’s just cruel,” groaned Tsushima as she brushed up the bangs of her fluffy blonde hair.

“You have three hours from the moment the test begins. This is a group match, so the distribution of manpower is up to you. You can stay in large groups to ensure you can

handle the traps or you can split into smaller groups to search a wider area more quickly. All of that is up to you."

Tatemiya, who held the position of substitute pontiff, wordlessly raised his index and middle finger and lightly waved them.

The approximately fifty men and women behind him silently split into groups of two or three.

Itsuwa was paired with Tsushima.

Tatemiya asked a question to the voice in their heads.

"How will we draw our map?"

"Did you think we would hand you a convenient blank map? Figure something out yourselves. You can search for something to use as paper, you can spray paint it on the wall, or you can memorize it. You need to learn that battles do not always start after everything is prepared. Any other questions?"

"When does it begin?"

"Right now."

As soon as that answer came, all of the lights in the station went out and complete darkness fell over the area.

Part 4

As Freadia Strikers of Necessarius listened to the male and female voices coming from her old crystal radio, she stabbed her spoon into a dish of seafood pilaf. She usually lived off of bread and pasta, but she would choose rice before and after work because she was fine with anything then. Her reasoning was that something filling was best when she had no guarantee when her next meal would be, but it was actually more of a superstition than anything.

(Now then. It comes down to the next three hours.)

This exam was carried out completely automatically.

Freadia's job was not to support the Amakusas or to control the magical traps. She was mostly meant to observe the Amakusas as they took the exam.

That was why she had a communication line connected to them using the cursed precious metal.

(If the church is afraid of having them run off, why not hold the exam outside of England?)

Freadia brought a bit of pilaf containing a small shrimp into her mouth, grimaced, and pushed the remaining shrimps to the edge of her plate with her spoon.

She could hear voices coming from the crystal radio.

“Dammit. We’re trapped in the dark here…”

“Shh. She might still be listening. No matter what she said, we do not really know how we are being scored here.”

“And I don’t like that communication method. Who knows how far it was applied. She might be able to hear our thoughts as well.”

It did not actually have that strong an output, but Freadia saw no need to inform them of that.

She dug a piece of squid out of the pilaf and continued her work.

“C’mon, it may be called the Underground, but it isn’t like there is any danger of running out of oxygen. If you have time to sit around chatting, shouldn’t you get down to business?”

If they were crushed by self-produced unease and fear, it was all over for them.

The issues Necessarius handled did not merely require skill and reason. They often swallowed up the minds of those that saw them and filled them with a fanatic tenacity. If one was too easily influenced by the surrounding situation and environment, they would never clear the very first step. It was the same as a translator who did not speak a foreign language.

“I think this is a lot easier than what we had to do when I joined,” commented Freadia.

“May I ask what that was?”

“I was thrown into the North Sea onboard a broken submarine. After that, I had to make it to the ocean surface within the time limit. Once that time limit passed, the explosives attached to the outside of the sub would blow it all up. Quite simple, don’t you think?”

Year by year, the exam was simplified and made easier.

It was possible the organization had realized how pointless it was to kill off the useful people they had scouted from around the world.

Even so, it was still difficult enough that a slight mistake could be literally fatal.

Part 5

As soon as the Underground station's lights went out, the members of the Amakusa Christian Church all switched over their focus.

They had methods of acquiring light, methods of seeing in limited light, and methods of not relying on their vision at all.

Itsuwa and the others split into groups of two or three. They naturally considered the possibility of traps that would react to methods of seeing in the dark.

For example, countless dolls could be set that would gather around light like insects.

For example, a flash of light could be emitted to take advantage of any night vision ability.

For example, the area could be filled with a flammable gas that would explode if they lit a fire.

"Gather back here in two and a half hours! We can pool our information to make the map then!"

"U-um, how do we decide who takes what route?"

"By whoever gets there first!! If you good-for-nothing men go with a ladies first policy, you'll be stuck with the worst ones!!"

The blonde fluffy haired Tsushima half-dragged Itsuwa down from the dust-covered and musty platform and onto the rails.

Itsuwa held a spear. Tsushima held a rapier.

Phosphorous lights different from a flame gathered at the tip of both weapons as the two ran into the semicircular tunnel. They arrived at a Y-shaped fork and continued down the right fork after marking as such on the wall.

"The standard strategy for a maze is to keep your hand on the wall and always turn in the same direction, right?"

“That’s the standard, yes. But it’s pointless if you end up looping around or being warped.”

It sounded like she was talking about a video game, but normal people were unaware that similar phenomena could be created in local environments.

Those normal businessmen were the ones walking home from work far above this abandoned tunnel.

“The annoying part is that we can’t just avoid that kind of thing. We have to fall for it to see what it is.”

“Do you honestly think we can complete the map and trap list within the time limit?”

Tsushima readily replied to Itsuwa’s question while illuminated by a pale light similar to an amplified version of a firefly’s light.

“Not a chance.”

“That’s what I thought…”

They were being scored by earning points. They had to walk through the entire labyrinth to make the map. And most importantly, not a word had been said about being disqualified if the map was not complete.

That meant the most important part was…

“The labyrinth and the traps are important, but the exit comes first. If we don’t have at least one safe route from the starting point to another exit, we can’t fulfill even the most basic requirement.”

“But…”

“We have no guarantee they will wait around for us.”

They heard a clunk come from further down the gently curving tunnel.

Something was approaching.

However, it was not a human. A vibration shook the tunnel a bit, so it was clearly something larger.

Tsushima approached the tunnel wall and spoke.

“She said there wouldn’t be any trains, right?”

“Yes, but can we trust what she said?”

“Hey!!”

Tsushima was unsure what to say, but she shouted out in an attempt to contact that person who was not present.

“What is it?” replied the voice.

“Are we allowed to destroy the traps to ensure our safety?”

“Didn’t I say how you handle this is up to you?”

“Perfect,” muttered Tsushima as she held her rapier at the ready.

Itsuwa’s spear was taller than she was, but she skillfully pointed its tip forward and raised her guard further.

And…

The approaching object appeared from around the gentle curve of the tunnel.

Part 6

Unlike in Japan, eating out in Europe was meant to last a long time. From the aperitif to the dessert, it was not unusual for the meal to last two to three hours. And the cultural idea of remaining quiet during a meal did not exist here. They would enjoy their meal such that it became unclear whether the food or the chatting was the main purpose.

And so…

It was the perfect culture for taking up a position at a table and gracefully taking care of certain types of jobs.

“Geh!? That’s just cruel!! What is this!? Is it based on a torture device!?”

“Yeah, I can’t think of a proper use for a water wheel underground…”

Freadia Strikers used a spoon to stir the corn potage she had newly ordered and she listened to a female voice coming from her crystal radio. She had assumed the potage would come in a mug, but it had come in a soup bowl. She was in a bit of a pinch.

“Burp… Well, has anyone dropped out yet?” she asked.

“Does it matter in a group match like this? As long as one person finishes, we all clear.”

“Yes, but…”

Someone like that would fall in a real battle.

One’s comrades would not always be around to save you. There were even times when one needed to temporarily doubt your comrades.

(They’re too soft. Can we really give the free pass to people like this?)

She would have been irritated if they were able to stand up to her, but it was also a problem if they were not reliable. Freadia fell into that stereotypically dangerous thought pattern.

As the corn soup covered with croutons made her feel a bit dizzy, she continued speaking.

“Having a closed environment is the foundation of magical combat. In fact, we construct temples by isolating a miniature world and twisting the laws within to a certain extent. The more special the location, the easier that is to do.”

“So you mean it’s like a game where the objective is dyeing as much of the field in your own colors as possible. I understand that reasoning, but…ksshh…”

“?”

Freadia Strikers frowned slightly.

She poked at the crystal radio with her spoon and thought about what could have caused the static.

Part 7

The approaching object was blood red.

It slimily reflected the light in a way that neither wood nor metal would. It was reminiscent of something greasy.

It was a gear fifty centimeters thick and with a diameter of three meters.

Three or four of them were rolling forward on their own.

Itsuwa saw through it at once.

“The breaking wheel. Are they using an execution tool motif!?”

The gears did not speak.

Instead, one took action.

Its rotation speed increased. After it tore into the ground like a slipping tire, it shot toward Itsuwa and Tsushima like a bullet. It was charging forward with its great mass. It was an extremely simple method of attack, but the gear used its momentum to expand its mobile area as if sticking to the walls and ceiling. It rolled along a complex trajectory as it approached.

The sight brought the image of giant teeth to Itsuwa’s mind.

Not fangs, but teeth.

Instead of something sharp meant to stab into its enemy, this was a flat molar that crushed and chewed everything with great pressure before swallowing it all.

“Itsuwa!!” shouted Tsushima from directly next to Itsuwa.

This focused Itsuwa’s mind back on reality.

This was no time to be filled with fear.

Itsuwa pointed her spear forward, held the entire handle up diagonally, and finally removed her fingers from the spear’s handle so she was supporting from below with only her palms.

The giant gears reached Itsuwa an instant later.

It moved across the fixed handle of the spear as if it were a rail. The gear shot by over Itsuwa’s head and flew into the air as if it had gone off a ski jump.

“Gh…!!”

Itsuwa felt pain as her backbone creaked.

However, the three-meter gear did not lose its balance.

It attached to the ceiling and slid back down to the ground by following the wall of the semicircular tunnel. It did not lose any momentum and in fact gained some as it charged toward Itsuwa once more.

(The breaking wheel. The most well-known is the French style. A giant metal object modeled after a wheel or gear would be used to execute someone by beating and bludgeoning. The wheel could be used as a restraint to strap the criminal’s broken limbs

to or it could be used as the blunt weapon directly used for the bludgeoning, but this looks like the simple version used to break the criminal's arms and legs.)

Repeating the same process again and again would be pointless.

Itsuwa held up her spear and glared at the approaching gear as she rapidly thought about what to do next.

(From a practical and logical point of view, a hammer or club would have been easier. The reason to keep it as a wheel is due to incorporating aspects from an ancient sacrificial ritual for the sun. In that case…!!)

Itsuwa spun her spear in her hand like a baton.

The circle this drew seemed to correspond to the giant approaching gear.

(The power of heaven is always represented by the sun. Even in the depths of the earth where no light reaches, there is nowhere the Lord's power cannot reach. Purify our peril with light as bright as midday!!)

In the next instant, a pure white explosion occurred in two different places.

The first was along the circle drawn by Itsuwa's spear. The second was the approaching gear. The two explosions matched each other perfectly and the dark tunnel was filled with brilliant light.

The giant gear that had been strengthened by the magical symbolism of the sun lost its shape like melted wax.

"It worked? In that case…!!"

No.

It was not just similar to wax.

"Not yet, Itsuwa!! Its true nature is wax. Melting it isn't enough to stop it!!"

"Eh…!?"

Itsuwa frantically brought her spear back up at the ready as she saw something like splashing liquid.

Something was blooming like a much too large flower from a South American jungle. The several-meters-long petals of this flower approached as if to swallow up Itsuwa. Dozens if not hundreds of sharp stake-like objects protruded from its surface.

There were two cruel devices that not even a child would need an explanation for.

The first was the guillotine.

The second was the iron maiden.

"...!!!???"

Itsuwa trusted the bad feeling rushing down her spine and, ignoring all of her actions up to that point, leaped backwards with all her might.

At the same moment, eight man-eating flower pedals slammed shut as if taking a bite out of the air.

"Itsuwa!"

"!?"

Sharp pain ran through the back of her right hand.

She had somehow avoided being bitten apart, but one of the stakes had torn Itsuwa's skin as if she had caught her hand on a nail sticking out of a wall.

With a sound like sludge running through a drain, the blood-colored man-eating flower lost its shape and returned to being a sticky mass. It was as if it were trying to raise itself to even further levels of cruelty.

The sight of that fresh blood seemed to shock Tsushima more than Itsuwa herself.

"It's really trying to kill us!?" she shouted.

The female voice that seemed to belong to their examiner replied directly into the back of her mind.

"Well, yes. They were special made by mixing a witch's potion into corpse wax taken from prisoners. They aren't happy unless they are allowed to go at least this far."

"Corpse wax... All of this is made of that...?"

Under special circumstances, an enshrined human corpse would not decay and the fat in the body would transform into wax. In a way, it could be seen as a means of eternally preserving a corpse, but it was usually an incidental event as opposed to the intentional Buddhist Sokushinbutsu or Egyptian mummification.

The usage of corpse wax did not have a real religious foundation. Instead, it had countless legends in folklore. That folklore included the idea that creating a candlestick out of a prisoner's arm once it turned to corpse wax would invite good fortune.

However...

Itsuwa looked back toward the hunk of wax that was the color of blood.

It had originally been a giant three-meter gear. How many corpses' worth of fat had been needed to create that? It was of course possible to safely and periodically gather fat from living humans by using liposuction, but the Anglican Church was known to have carried out their inquisition on a greater scale and more severely than anywhere else in the world. Itsuwa doubted they would have done that.

"This is no time to be overwhelmed," warned Tsushima with rapier in hand. "It's still moving. It's trying to take our lives! It doesn't matter if it was made of humans. Standing here blankly will only get us added to the wax!!"

The liquefied mass of wax took a large action.

It moved straight up as if it was standing.

(But wait a second. Wax? Folklore? Something doesn't fit here…)

"They have no core," said the female voice. "They have no weak point. No matter how much you destroy them, they will simply change form. Now, a question: what will you do about such an unreasonable trap?"

"We just have to analyze its symbolism," spat back the blonde fluffy haired Tsushima as she held up her rapier. "What is the symbolic pillar of these corpse wax gears!? Maybe we have to remake the fat into soap. Maybe we have to forge criminal documents declaring them innocent. At any rate, if we find the strongest pillar giving this trap its form, it will cease to function!!"

"But will it actually go that well…ksshh…?"

Itsuwa frowned slightly.

The slight static appeared as a stabbing headache in her temple.

What was that static?

Part 8

At that time, the girl charged with observing the Amakusa Christian Church as they took the special entrance exam, Freadia Strikers, had not yet noticed the oddity.

As she listened to the various voices coming from the crystal radio, she poked at her ice cream dessert with a small fork.

(If they keep this up, this should make for a good fight.)

It seemed to be a hard fight, but it was praiseworthy that not one of them had dropped out by the midpoint. What was needed first and foremost in a battle was not the ability to always spot the enemy or the firepower to always defeat the enemy. It was the ability to come back alive. Everything else could be gained through experience later. That crucial ability was the only one that required a natural sense to pull off.

(Well, even if it is a mock battle, they will still die if they are killed. *Even if it is only on paper,* the current link will send the damage back to them.)

She thought to herself while scraping off a piece of the ice cream that had a reddish-purple wine-based syrup on it.

(I still cannot get over the idea of *a tabletop game with magical symbols incorporated in*. It makes me shudder just to think about a battle where the roll of a dice is directly linked to your life or death.)

In truth, the special entrance exam the Anglican Church had given to the Amakusa Christian Church was a mental task similar to meditation. The target members were thrown into a small underground room where they perfectly simulated a nonexistent incident based on a prepared rulebook, parameters, dice, map, and the temporary character explanation they were meant to role play as.

The most basic act for a magician was the mental task of converting their body's life force into magical power. Another basic act was dividing off a miniature world as a temple and temporarily twisting the laws within in order to call in the power of leylines, Telesma, or something else. Performing those different ceremonies could be called the miniature version of the modern Western magic style of summoning.

(Well, an organization needs more than just brute strength. Searching, healing, communicating, negotiating, concealing… You need many different kinds of pieces to play chess. But I do wonder if it's okay to let in people like Orsola Aquinas who took the exam earlier.)

Several photographs were spread out on the table.

They pictured the members of the Amakusa Christian Church. And she had more data than that. She had a diagram detailing the gimmicks used in this exam and report on both the historical background and magical conditions of the area used as the stage.

But…

Itsuwa or Tsushima would have cried out in protest had they seen what was in those documents.

However, this was not because they detailed even more cruel tricks they had not seen yet.

It was the wrong location.

Itsuwa and the others had entered an Underground station in Lambeth.

The diagram on that table started from a completely different Underground station in Soho.

Of course, what Itsuwa and the others had experienced was not an incredibly high quality illusion or a virtual battle taking place in an inner universe.

They had been forced into a physical battle in reality that the real Anglican Church was not aware of.

(Even if the exam gets simplified more and more each year, I feel left behind by the modern age. Well, more and more supernatural phenomena are being symbolized and simplified into magical circles, so it makes sense that you can create the ultimate magical combat stage on paper.)

Of course, Itsuwa and the others were not actually fighting on paper.

At that very moment, they were battling a giant trap made of corpse wax in an Underground tunnel.

There was an explanation for Freadia Strikers thinking otherwise.

There was only one possible explanation.

Part 9

It started with a magical transmission from Tatemiya Saiji.

Just like Itsuwa and Tsushima, he would have been working hard as he purposefully activated the traps in the Subway tunnels. However, he was the man who held the position of substitute pontiff. To put it bluntly, his skill in magic had to be greater than Itsuwa's.

And Tatemiya was speaking in the voice of someone who had been driven to the edge of a cliff.

"This is odd. This is really odd!!"

“Substitute pontiff…?”

“That strange static made me curious, so I tried amplifying it. It turns out there are two communication lines in place on top of each other. There are two sets of communications meant for Freadia Strikers! *And one of them is a fake!!*”

If Freadia A and Freadia B were communicating with Itsuwa and the others at the same time, the real Freadia and the Amakusas would both have realized something was wrong.

However, there was a way of preventing that.

It was a very simple method.

“You mean there is someone fooling us as well?” asked Tsushima in a trembling voice.

“If the real Amakusas and the fake Freadia are connected and the fake Amakusas and the real Freadia are connected, both sides will not realize they are being deceived. Some unknown person is taking the official Necessarius entrance exam while avoiding an official inspection!!”

“W-wait a second! If the free pass given to those that pass the exam is given to this suspicious person, they will be able to freely enter the storage areas of Necessarius’s powerful spiritual items and grimoires, right!?”

And in response…

“Hee hee.”

The voice of Freadia Strikers – or more accurately, of someone claiming to be her – sounded directly in Itsuwa and the others’ heads.

“Hee hee hee

“Me?” said Itsuwa in confusion. “Oh, I get it now! The most well-known folklore related to wax is the curse doll. If you put the hair or fingernail of your target inside, you can attack them remotely by damaging the doll with a pin. That wax doll sorcery is similar to the Ushi no Koku Mairi!!”

With a sticky noise, the red wax doll charged carelessly toward Itsuwa.

It held a red spear which it stabbed toward her.

The attack did not come at such great speed that it could not be followed visually. Nor did it employ sleight of hand to distract from the true attack.

And yet…

“!?”

If Tsushima had not stuck her rapier in between them, Itsuwa would have been skewered through the stomach.

For some reason, she had been unable to respond.

She saw it coming, but she had been unable to defend or evade.

The wax doll’s spear tip had cleanly passed through the gaps in Itsuwa’s defenses like someone playing their hand in rock-paper-scissors after seeing their opponent’s hand.

“It’s a curse!” shouted Tsushima as she parried the wax doll’s spear with her rapier. “By taking in its target’s blood, it can carry out attacks that are guaranteed to bring death to that target. That is the true form of this magic! Now that it has completed its wax doll form, all of its attacks will reach you. Even if the attack would be easily handled by anyone else, you can never escape if it is targeting you!!”

“That means…”

If Tsushima did not hold back every single one of the wax doll’s attacks, Itsuwa would be killed in a single blow.

But that was not the worst part of the situation.

The biggest problem was that it would all be over if Tsushima was so much as scratched while defending Itsuwa. If Tsushima’s blood was taken and another wax doll was added, Itsuwa and Tsushima would be instantly killed while unable to resist.

“Really, we just needed you trapped in there until we had the free pass,” said the female voice. “But we have no real reason to want you alive. In fact, having you dead would be safer. So, sorry, but please die for our sake.”

Tsushima handled the repeated attacks from the wax doll's spear. Even though Itsuwa was able to follow each and every one of those attacks, she knew she would not be able to block even one of them. Like a goalie who misread a penalty kick in soccer, Itsuwa's defense would be completely off sync with the actual attack.

And…

There was more than just the one wax doll.

"…!!"

The remaining giant gears charged toward Tsushima from multiple directions.

If Tsushima evaded, Itsuwa would be left defenseless and would be immediately killed by the wax doll. However, Tsushima could not defend against all of the approaching attacks. Even if she could handle the wax doll, she would be crushed by the gears.

It was one or the other.

There was currently no way of saving both their lives.

Part 10

And…

The multiple giant gears unhesitatingly attacked from multiple directions in order to crush Itsuwa and Tsushima. The gears forcefully crashed into each other. A tremendous sound of destruction exploded within the Underground tunnel as if large trucks had run straight into each other.

And Itsuwa and Tsushima…

The two stood just a few centimeters from where the giant gears had collided.

"This is the story of paradise before it was corrupted by sin."

By taking in Itsuwa's blood, the wax doll had obtained the ability to produce attacks she could never avoid.

But this was not something that "just so happened" to occur. There had to be a reason behind it.

“God created man and arranged to give everything to him, but the perfectness left the man feeling uneasy. The man could not live in solitude and the animals living in paradise were not enough to fill his heart.”

To identify Tsushima as a target, a curse using a hair or fingernail would use a method known as “infection”. Even if a portion of the body was cut away, it was thought to maintain a close connection to its owner. That was why burning the fingernail of a hated enemy or putting the fingernail in a doll and destroying that doll would also harm the original owner.

“God, being generous, was willing to use his power to fill the man’s heart, but the man did not choose that method.”

In this case, the connection was that of one’s life force.

The power created within Itsuwa’s body was being bypassed through the wax doll as well. By detecting the changes in the flow of that power, it could read Itsuwa’s defense and evasion patterns and produce an attack that slipped through the gaps. That was why Itsuwa could not avoid the wax doll’s attacks no matter what she tried.

And in that case…

“That one man should have been enough of a beginning in paradise. Two starting points are not needed. Each subsequent man created from then one should have been a single point.”

They only needed to sever the flow of that power.

Or to move it elsewhere.

There were many different legends perfect for doing just that.

“God pitied the lonely man and created a partner from his rib. That partner’s name was Eve. That is the name of the starting point and model for all women!”

Because Eve was made from Adam’s rib, they returned to their whole form when they married. That was the concept behind the standard weddings performed in churches.

When performing large scale and systematic magical ceremonies, this method would be used to take the life force needed to refine magic power and concentrate it on a single point.

It was a standard method of creating a boost.

However, it could only be used by women.

“All women come from the missing rib and must join with their lifelong partner through marriage!!”

As soon as Itsuwa let out that cry, the giant gears and the wax doll that had collided lost to their momentum and were smashed to pieces.

They shattered like a piece of pottery, but the pieces turned into a sticky liquid as soon as they struck the floor and walls.

“Ugh…” groaned Itsuwa as the pieces struck her from nearby.

She was covered in red wax all across her face, her chest, and her lower stomach. The pieces of wax were still wriggling creepily, but they showed no sign of gathering together and reforming into a torture or execution device. It seemed this trembling was their death throes rather than a conscious action.

“I see,” said Tsushima with a sigh as she wiped away the sweat on her brow from all the effort she had gone through. She stared down at the wax that was not harming its target despite being stuck on that target’s skin. “So they were created to attack any life force they detected in their territory. The wax doll then increased its accuracy by identifying a specific target. …Come to think of it, these were made of corpse wax taken from the dead. It may have also incorporated a method of having the dead attack the living.”

“Just like with an anti-missile flare, this was no real threat once you can fool its sensor.” Itsuwa turned back the way they had come. “Sticking around to clean up here isn’t going to help. Let’s just leave this here and head back up through the station.”

Part 11

“That was a horrible test,” sighed Tatemiya Saiji after the Amakusas had gathered at the Underground station and made their way safely aboveground.

The blonde fluffy haired Tsushima asked, “What will the Anglican Church do?”

“If they were planning to be friendly, they would have sent backup. But I see no sign of that. That means the situation is quite bad.”

“The free pass,” groaned Itsuwa.

That incantation allowed anyone to pass through the magical locks controlled by Necessarius. If the mystery attackers had tricked the real Freadia Strikers and obtained that free pass, this truly was a crisis.

Powerful weapons could be stolen from the storehouses that held various spiritual items and powerful grimoires.

The security protecting England's VIPs could be neutralized for an assassination.

The means of attack with the free pass were so many that there was no way of guessing the enemy's next move and lying in wait. And the more pressing issue for the Amakusas was…

"This happened during the entrance exam to test our ability," said Tatemiya with a bitter expression. "The Anglican Church has not yet accepted us as allies. There are likely groups within the church that are suspicious of us. So if a major incident occurs using the free pass supposedly given to us, the odds are pretty good we'll be the top suspects."

The reason the Amakusas were in England in the first place was because fleeing there was their only hope after the previous incident they had caused.

There was only one method of ensuring they were accepted by the Anglicans.

"We need to do this on our own," said Tatemiya who represented them all. "We will track down who is behind this and capture them before they can cause any damage. I can't think of any other way of keeping the suspicion off of us."

Part 12

"?"

Freadia Strikers looked puzzled.

After confirming the completion of the special entrance exam, she had given the free pass to the participants. Immediately afterwards, the crystal radio had ceased to produce even a single voice.

(It can't be… No, it can't be!!)

She immediately grabbed the large dial on the crystal radio. She twisted it as hard as she could. The harmless curse immediately regained its lethality and it should have destroyed the minds of those on the other end using chaotic static.

However, Freadia heard an unpleasant bursting noise.

She grimaced and pulled her hand away from the crystal radio as a stench similar to melting cables wafted up from the device.

She clicked her tongue and opened the outer casing of the crystal radio.

In the incredibly simple structure, the “core” made of pyrite had broken to an amusing extent.

“A curse reversal, hm?”

Her method of communication had long since been analyzed and a countermeasure had been put together.

She had no way of knowing where these people had gone after taking the free pass. They had vanished into the shadows of London and could easily penetrate Necessarius’s most important facilities.

“Damn. Do you have any idea how much I’ve spent buying these on online auctions?” she muttered in annoyance.

Freadia pulled out a rectangular pill case made of plastic. The small box was divided into multiple compartments and several stones were held within.

She removed one and placed it into the core of the crystal radio.

She closed the casing and manipulated the dial again to contact her higher-ups in Necessarius.

“Yes, yes. Sorry. It seems they are so skilled it isn’t even funny. Yes. They shook off my curse. I do not know how they will use the free pass, but I doubt they disappeared for no reason. Yes. And so I am requesting reinforcements. What? You want me to actually work for once because you pay me a salary? We are fed by the people’s tax money, so I thought we were pretty much the same thing as government workers.”

Even as she spoke in a serious tone, Freadia unconcernedly scooped up the last bite of ice cream and brought it to her mouth.

She wiped her mouth with a napkin and continued speaking as she grabbed her receipt.

“Yes. Please eliminate the Amakusas as soon as they are found. Yes, I mean that in the standard and literal way. Please kill them all.”

♦

The pursuer and the pursued.

A battle in the complexly laid out city of London was about to begin.

CHAPTER 2

Part 1

The magician Freadia Strikers stood in an underground room.

The space was a perfect cube with each dimension measuring about twenty meters. It was colored white and only white. Like a studio for a movie's composite shots, something felt off about the room. No one would have believed it if they were told it was an Underground station.

It had no furnishings such as tables or chairs.

In the center of the room were pieces of old parchment, a few objects similar to chess pieces, and two special twelve-sided dice. There was also a pile of small pieces of paper modeled after money. That must have been used in the calculation of some kind of cost.

This was the testing ground for the entrance exam given by Necessarius, the Anglican Church's 0th Parish.

Everything was reproduced on paper via roleplaying. Under those harsh conditions, the roll of a die could lead to death due to starvation or battle within the game. However…

"Now then," muttered Freadia as she placed a crystal radio on the pure white floor. She turned the large dial and contacted the person she needed to speak with. "Freadia here. This isn't good news. Yes, yes. The stage is empty and they left no traces we could use to track them. I tried tuning to a few different wavelengths, but I couldn't amplify the residual information."

"What do you need?"

"The usual. Start by distributing pictures of them and checking all the important points on the security camera network around London. Yes, of course that won't be enough to find expert magicians, but we might be able to detect the magic they use to slip past that security."

The enemy had fled after acquiring the "free pass", a spell that allowed one to pass through the magical gates of Necessarius-run facilities as proper members of the organization. (Freadia had not realized this enemy was a group disguised as the Amakusas and not the Amakusas themselves, however.)

If they stole a powerful spiritual item or grimoire or if they assassinated a national VIP, the level of danger would rise dramatically, but this was the capital of one of the world's leading countries of magicians.

That meant they had countermeasures.

(If we seal off the city right away, the enemy won't be able to move. But they should know that. They were able to pull off something on this large a scale, so they should be able to accurately calculate the risks. In other words, they have a means of safely reaching their next destination from this testing ground.)

"What about reinforcements?" asked the voice coming from the crystal radio.

"Call as many as are available."

"Flack Anchors's team is closest. I will contact them."

As she listened to that voice, Freadia spread a large map out on the floor. The enemy had stolen the free pass, so they were likely targeting a location that required the free pass to enter. She marked the important points and guessed at what detours they would take if certain roads were blocked off.

The sewers.

The gaps between buildings.

The large underground air ducts of public heating and cooling.

The private roads where public cameras could not be placed.

Just like Academy City and New York, London boasted a tremendous number of security cameras. Not only where they on the streets and stores, but they were on vending machines, ATMs, taxis, and trucks. A security network made up of a six digit number of cameras filled almost the entire city.

This was of course not perfect. However, if one knew it was not perfect, one could easily set up other traps in the few holes remaining.

"By the way," said the voice.

"?"

"I've been wondering. Is there any logical reason to use a communication method based on a precious metal curse? That method has no religious base and using a piece of folklore with an unknown origin does not seem like it would have very stable rules to me."

“True,” spat out Freadia politely.

That comment did not match her ideology.

A curse was a method of attacking someone remotely by directly linking the cause and the effect. And yet the story of the diamond that mysteriously killed each of its owners was missing that “cause”. It had not been acquired by ransacking a king’s grave. People had not killed each other in order to acquire it. It was something someone had just so happened to find one day, yet it killed people.

A theory with clear rules was easy to use, amplify, and control. But on the other hand, it would have a set upper limit from the beginning. A single unit of fuel would cause a single phenomenon. That was all it was.

But this cursed jewel with vague rules held the possibility of breaking through that upper limit. Its cause and effect were not clearly known, but it undoubtedly spread its curse. Something about that reminded Freadia of a power that ignored cause and effect like a perpetual motion machine.

“I have my reasons. I do. Yes, in all things, it is healthier for diversity to spread.”

Part 2

While being pursued, the members of the Amakusa Christian Church walked openly through the London night. The electric signs along the streets were displaying the current time and some simple headlines. It seemed the leaders of the pound-based economic cooperation centered on England were gathering nearby for an international conference. Magicians like Itsuwa and the others never knew much about news concerning the public side of the world.

“It’s already 8:30. I feel like picking up a burger somewhere.”

“Y-you can’t go in a restaurant, substitute pontiff…”

Itsuwa frantically tried to stop him.

Something about Tatemiya Saiji made him liable to charge into the danger zone despite understanding just how dangerous it was.

They were on the run, but they did not sneak around. They knew that doing that was not enough to escape the security camera network. In fact, trying to escape the surveillance would make them stand out more.

And so…

Itsuwa and the others had chosen to travel by foot through the most crowded area of London. This would create a wall of people to keep them unseen. Security cameras were not usually set to look up from below (because no one wanted to have a camera looking up their skirt), so it was possible to trick the cameras by burying oneself in a crowd.

Even so, a group of fifty walking together would stand out too much.

They split into five groups of about ten and traveled in different directions.

They were fortunate that there were plenty of Japanese sightseers and businessmen around.

“But what do we do now? This crowd barrier will only work for another hour. If only people enjoyed more of the nightlife.”

“What bases do we have around here?” asked Tsushima, a woman with fluffy blonde hair.

The Amakusas had only just arrived in London the other day, but they already had several hideouts prepared in the city that the Anglicans were unaware of. It was not that they did not trust the Anglicans. This was simply a habit of theirs. It was the same as ants or bees creating nests or hives.

Itsuwa adjusted the bag she carried over her shoulder which contained her disassembled spear.

“This is near Soho, right? Then it would be the mobile home in the Next Shop’s parking lot.”

“No, we can’t go there!!” suddenly cut in the elderly Isahaya.

Itsuwa was shocked.

“Eh? Eh? Did some information leak out so they will be waiting for us there?”

“Sorry, but that mobile home is filled with piles of golf sets. There probably isn’t any room to stand, so I don’t think it will work as a base.”

“Honestly, this is the problem with old men’s tastes!!” declared Tsushima exaggeratedly as she brought a hand to her forehead.

One might think they would stand out if they shouted like this, but the wall of people around them was quite loud as well. Lowering their voices to whispers would have stood out more.

“Why would you even buy so many? You never do anything more than go to the driving range on holidays!!”

“What are you saying!? This is the country of St. Andrews!! What’s wrong with using my own money toward my dream!?”

“B-but…” Itsuwa lowered her gaze, but still strongly brought the conversation back on track. “If we cannot use the mobile home, we can use the office we rented near Nine & Clocks.”

“N-no!! Not that place…!!”

Everyone turned toward the large young man named Ushibuka with looks that said “What is it now!?”

“It’s filled with piles of pin-up magazines I bought like crazy to celebrate coming to England…”

“You bought enough to fill up the entire place in just a few days!? Can you not limit yourself at all!?”

“But!! Aren’t you curious now that we’re in the West? You are, aren’t you!? C’mon, men, back me up on this!! Stop looking away!!”

Ushibuka continued shouting something while Tsushima grabbed his collar and shook him around, but Tatemiya gave Itsuwa a look that said trying to comfort him would only hurt him worse. She emptied her mind and got back on track.

“Th-then that leaves the apartment that serves food for the workers in the Indian district.”

“No!!” shouted Tatemiya.

As he stood before the Amakusas’ silent and overpowering gazes, Tatemiya spoke timidly as if sitting in the defendant’s seat in court.

“We can’t go there! We just can’t!! It’s the cosplay base for the waitress uniform, Chinese dress, and other outfits I was going to have Itsuwa wear!!”

“Excuse me while I go burn all that.”

Hearing those casually spoken yet extremely dangerous words, Tsushima frantically restrained Itsuwa whose face no longer showed any emotion.

Both the Priestess Kanzaki Kaori and Itsuwa looked like the diligent straight man at first, but they could actually make their way to the upper levels of the psychotic rankings. That was the frightening side of the Amakusas. As the Hannya mask showed, it had long been

said a refined Japanese woman would explode into something inhuman if too much anger built up. However, Itsuwa had thus far managed to avoid going that far.

Now.

Leaving that aside, where were they to have their strategy meeting?

Part 3

In the end, Itsuwa's group chose a temporary base in a Chinatown food warehouse.

The large Ushibuka glanced through the dimly lit space.

"There's an air compressor and…are these cloth bag-like things fish tanks? It looks seafood related… Maybe this is for a Shanghai restaurant."

"At least it isn't a Sichuan restaurant. I want to avoid having spices everywhere."

As she listened to the blonde Tsushima's comment, Itsuwa asked Tatemiya a question.

"What should we do about contacting the other groups?"

"We shouldn't use any communication spells. The Anglican magicians are experts at searching out and destroying magicians. Trying any tricks in their home city would get us detected immediately."

But that also meant the risk of detection was lower if they did not use magical methods of contacting each other. Even if completely slipping past the Anglicans was impossible, it would be enough to buy some time as the Anglicans analyzed it.

It was the same as how the ninja of old would systematically place colored rice and other objects on the roadside to secretly communicate.

Information could be conveyed by marking building walls with scratches from blades or with spray paint.

"Now, let's go back over what we know," began Tsushima after clapping her hands twice to gather attention. "We came to London in order to take the special entrance exam for Necessarius, the Anglican Church's 0th Parish. At the same time, someone else claiming to be the Amakusas slipped into the official entrance exam. And they were polite enough to prepare a decoy operator so we, the real Amakusas, would not catch on."

“Can we assume they were after the free pass?” asked Itsuwa timidly. “They weren’t trying to destroy trust in us, were they?”

“There might be some magicians in the Anglican Church who do not want a small weak sect joining. However, they would only need to make it so we never took the entrance exam in the first place. Putting on an act of betraying their boss would be too great a risk.” Tatemiya leaned up against a pillar in the food warehouse. “But if this enemy causes some trouble with the free pass, it’s possible the Anglicans will suspect us. Even if this enemy has nothing against us, it would be more convenient for them if the suspicion landed on us.”

“But.” Tsushima sat on a pile of bags of wheat. “Do you honestly think the Anglicans are that stupid? They are the best in the world at magician countermeasures, after all. They should soon catch on to the simple trick of having fake exam participants for the operator and a fake operator for the exam participants.”

“That depends on how much the enemy researched us…”

“Yeah,” said the short boy named Kouyagi with a bitter smile. “But it’s laughable to suggest they had been planning this for years. After all, it was a collection of miracles that led to us being forced to join the Anglican Church. This isn’t something they could predict by intercepting some internal information. A stranger couldn’t know something that surprised even us.”

“Then let’s say there just had to be an entrance exam,” muttered Tatemiya. “We’ll assume there was no need for it to be us specifically. In that case…”

“The enemy knew nothing about us. They couldn’t imitate us very well. They might have left some obvious signs that they were not us in the testing ground.”

“Yes. Unless the Anglican Church is not all it’s cracked up to be, they should realize what happened two or three hours from now at the earliest and by dawn at the latest. However…” said Tsushima.

Yes.

The enemy who had set all this up would know they were pressed for time. They would take some large-scale action with the free pass within that two or three hour window of safety.

Tatemiya brought a hand to his forehead.

“Now then, everyone. Imagine you have the free pass that lets you freely open the magical locks Necessarius has set up around London. What would you do?”

“You could use it to assassinate a VIP, steal spiritual items or grimoires, attack the leylines or other veins of spiritual energy, or destroy defensive facilities from within. Good defensive facilities to target would be the buildings with wide-range radars for detecting magic power or the mobile fortress for ocean countermeasures. If these are the preliminary preparations for an attack on the nation of England, they might try to destroy those places before the actual attack.”

“In other words, there are plenty of options. We cannot figure out what the enemy is after by judging what they could gain from this.”

“Not so fast.” Tatemiya grinned. “Remember the time limit? The Anglicans could realize these true culprits exist in only two or three hours. Even if they can freely enter any magical facility in London using the free pass, they can’t go after a target that would take too long. For example, they wouldn’t have time for a large scale mission like destroying the mobile fortress from within.”

The elderly Isahaya spread a large map out on one side of the food warehouse.

He used a red pen to mark all the facilities and buildings in London strictly run by the Anglican Church.

“The British Museum, Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, Lambeth Palace, St. George’s Cathedral… This is the capital of England, so there are plenty of juicy targets, but it isn’t any of these. If they seriously wanted to take over any of them, they would have to cause a commotion on the level of a war even with the free pass.”

Itsuwa and the others accurately calculated out how long they thought it would take them to break into each facility if they had the free pass. Ironically, this mental work was very similar to the tabletop entrance exam they had been meant to take.

And they found the answer.

“The grimoires in this city library’s repair room, the storage vault for great men eternally preserved in this public cemetery, and the core of the ‘living mansion’. It has to be one of these three.”

“Looking only at the difficulty level of the facility, yes. But think about where they’re located. The living mansion is near the Necessarius women’s dorm and that public cemetery is managed by Anglican churches at all times. If they messed up with either one, reinforcements would arrive within thirty seconds.”

“So that means…” Itsuwa called the final remaining candidate to mind. “They’re after the grimoires in the city library?”

The Anglicans would catch on before long, but that would not matter if great damage was done before then.

The Amakusas would be unable to avoid being made a convenient scapegoat when the Anglicans were looking to blame someone. And the odds were high that the Anglicans would not listen if Itsuwa and the others brought this information to them now.

And that meant…

They could not wait for the Anglicans to act. They had to immediately head to that city library and capture the true culprits before they caused any obvious damage.

Part 4

Freadia Strikers left the Underground station used as the testing ground and travelled through a narrow corridor out to the nighttime streets of London.

A large man awaited her with about ten subordinates.

“I am Flack Anchors. I believe you were contacted about me.”

“Yes. I am Freadia Strikers.”

They exchanged as few words as possible.

Even within the Anglican Church and Necessarius, magicians were strongly individualist and most of them disliked cooperating with others. These were people who viewed the magic name carved into their heart above all else. Prioritizing one’s personal objective while belonging to an organization would never be allowed in a proper society, but they had no problem doing exactly that.

“A quick warning. I use an intentional misinterpretation of a cursed jewel that appears in folklore. Please remove anyone from your team who would cause issues with the construction and compatibility of the spell.”

“You need not worry about that,” replied Flack curtly.

He was holding a long narrow duralumin case that looked like it held something more dangerous than a musical instrument. The men standing silently behind him held identical cases. Freadia guessed they might hold swords or wands. She clicked her tongue for a different reason.

(So they're magicians who don't hide their weapons.)

She did not know what Flack and the others' magic names were, but this type of person would not hesitate to use force. They were part of the Anglican Church, so she wanted to believe they were not stupid enough to get civilians caught in the crossfire. However, she knew she would not get along with them as she specialized in spells that killed silently.

"What do you think the enemy is after?"

"You're testing your comrades in a situation like this?" Flack gave a scornful laugh. "The grimoires in the repair room of that city library. If they want to quickly and surely use the free pass, that would be the ideal target from both a cost and risk perspective."

"So they're after a dangerous grimoire?"

"Most of the ones stored there are copies, but it does have some truly dangerous originals. I think there are fewer than twenty of them, though."

As the name suggested, the city library was a facility created from the good intentioned donations of normal people. The library would accept anything that did not violate standard decency: illustrated encyclopedias, dictionaries, technical books, novels, theatre scripts, movie pamphlets, American comics, and Franco-Belgian comics. Its preservation and repairing abilities were known to be quite high, so it was known as the final disposal place for rare books that collectors could no longer look after themselves.

With that explanation, one could see the true purpose of the library.

It would retrieve the dangerous grimoires that had been lost and then store them where no one would see them.

"That's close by."

"Only five hundred meters. It would be faster to walk than to call a car."

In that five-hundred-meter distance, Freadia spotted several magicians mixed into the crowds. They were all members of Necessarius.

"Even if they have the free pass, that doesn't allow them to break through every wall. It would be difficult enough for the Amakusas to make it to the city library, so how do they plan to safely escape London and England after acquiring the grimoire they want?"

"Don't ask me." Flack shrugged. "But England is one of the world's leading magical countries. There are enough incidents every day that failures like us are necessary to keep around. The outlaws may share information on holes in our system which looks perfect."

That did not sound like an intellectual point of view.

Stage magic was pointless if one was simply surprised at the result and gave no thought to the trick behind it. Some mafia had a method of perfectly disposing of a corpse. Some gang had connections to high-ranking government officials. Those were nothing but legends. And someone was not a specialist if he only gathered legends. What was wanted from a specialist were explanations of the concrete methods and ways of crushing that cycle once and for all.

“At any rate,” spat out Freadia. She stroked the old crystal radio through the leather of her handbag. “The city library comes first. Let’s finish this before they get their hands on the grimoire.”

Part 5

The Amakusas had concluded the true culprits were likely after the grimoires in the city library.

The next objective for Itsuwa and the others was to stop this enemy from stealing any of the grimoires. And to do that, they had to make their way to that library as well.

However…

“Not good. Not good,” said the fluffy blonde haired Tsushima after checking outside the Chinatown food warehouse. “The evening rush has ended. From here on out, we can’t pass the security cameras by hiding behind walls of people.”

Necessarius magicians hid in the shadows of London. Some were direct combat members and others were in charge of gathering intelligence. Unlike the Amakusas, the Anglican Church was connected to an entire nation. They could use that authority to pass disguised wanted posters to the police and request checks on the important points of the security camera network. Once the Amakusas were located, a large force would be immediately dispatched.

The Amakusas were skilled, but they could not forcibly break their way through one of the three greatest denominations of Christianity that had grown large enough to swallow up an entire nation.

“But if Necessarius is really that skilled, we can’t just stay hidden here. This is a disposable base that will be found eventually. Once they catch up to us, they’ll just bomb it.”

“Bomb it…?” muttered Itsuwa worriedly.

Tatemiya raised his index finger and spun it around.

“It’s not as bad as Rome in Italy, but London is a city with more churches than gas stations. And that means it has that many bell towers. If they ring the bells throughout the city according to a magical procedure, they can create a large-scale magical attack to crush any magicians hiding in the city.”

“It’s past nine at night in their capital city. Would the Anglicans really do something so noticeable?”

Whether with the military or the police, peacekeeping organizations were minority groups that restricted the actions of the majority. Many (so-called) harmless magicians lived in London. Indiscriminately attacking them along with the enemies of the state could create even more enemies.

Then again…

“Well, they can’t hide the sound of the bells itself. It could easily be seen as a noise issue this late at night. I doubt they will make a decision that would let the normal citizens realize something is wrong, but we need to make our plans while assuming that card is on the table.”

London was the home of the Anglican Church, so the Amakusas could not stand up to their manpower or facilities.

They may have had a slight advantage in covert operations, but it was not enough to altogether slip past the Anglican surveillance network.

However, they had to run around that strictly watched city if they were to defeat the true culprits who were headed for the city library.

Itsuwa rubbed her slender chin with one hand.

“How far is the city library from here?”

“Just a few kilometers. There are two bridges on the way,” answered Tsushima.

Kouyagi looked up at the ceiling in annoyance.

“We’re just gonna be spotted on the way. They’ll have people waiting on the bridges where the routes gather together.”

“It doesn’t matter if they notice us,” said Itsuwa quickly as she walked over to the map Isahaya had spread out on the floor.

She picked up a red pen and drew out a general course.

Tatemiya frowned.

“What? Why would we take that detour?”

“Wait a second, Itsuwa. You’re thinking of a pretty dirty tactic, aren’t you?” asked Tsushima as she checked over the “corners” of the red line and saw what existed there.

Itsuwa let out a slow breath.

“We need some form of transportation. A tanker truck full of fuel would work nicely.”

Part 6

Torquay Shadowmint was a magician teased as conducting a bell chorus.

The young man sitting on the roof of a city church’s bell tower placed a brass staff over his shoulder. Several small bells on the end of the staff shook yet did not ring. Instead, they produced a human voice.

“We have detected movement in Chinatown. A few people closely resembling the indicated Amakusas have been spotted. They are traveling in a stolen tanker truck. Their destination is unknown. Attack them when you see fit.”

“Will do, will do☆”

With that offhand remark, Torquay looked through his binoculars.

In one line of headlights along the broad roads, he spotted the target vehicle.

It was between three and four kilometers away.

(Did they get sick of sneaking around? Did they think driving a monstrous vehicle at full speed would keep us from jumping onto it or stopping it? If so, they don’t understand magic.)

As Tatemiya had guessed, Torquay used church bells for magic.

In both the East and the West, the ringing of bells was often done to drive out evil over a wide area. The ringing of a church or Buddhist temple bell reaching every corner of the city was a symbol of the people being ruled by religion. By placing those bells in the center of a village, external malice could be pushed back.

On the other hand, there were legends saying that, if "something less than good" rang the bell in an abandoned church or Buddhist temple, it could do harm to the residents of the area. The bell had been created to drive off evil, but the theory had a high degree of freedom in how much it could be rearranged depending on the situation.

If a bell that could attack every corner of the city was rung, it would become an indiscriminate form of attack.

However, that was not what this was.

Anglican magic was not that kind.

"Now then. Seven Days Church, Sword Sanctuary's second bell tower, St. Gabriel Church, and Red Star Monastery's first bell tower. That should do it."

The church bells had inscriptions.

The intent was for the effect described by that inscription to reach every corner of the city when the bell was rung.

And so…

By combining multiple bells or ringing them in a certain order, the isolated inscriptions could be linked together to produce completely different effects.

"'God does not overlook a single sinner.' / 'Our father does not forgive evil.' / 'Faith brings light to the darkness.' / 'Our Lord has chosen you.' …That should be enough to specify the enemy and accurately bomb them."

Who, what, where, when, why, and how. There was a children's game of creating a strange sentence by having different people answer each of those questions and stringing them together into one statement. What Torquay was doing was not much different from that. By breaking apart the sentences and building them back up, he could preserve the power in the words but produce effects different from the original ones. That was the magic he used.

A metallic noise rang out and Torquay struck the bottom of his brass staff against the roof of the bell tower he was still sitting on. The collection of small bells on the end linked with the different churches and remotely caused them to ring. This was the same as Idol Theory where attacking a doll would destroy the human.

Torquay viewed the target tanker truck through his binoculars once more and gathered strength in the hand on the staff as he prepared to pull the final trigger.

“You damn thugs. To use a phrase from your culture, welcome to the Kodoku jar[1]. Conflict has forced us to hone our spells two or three levels greater than you could imagine.”

And just as he said that, Torquay Shadowmint’s body stiffened as he looked through the binoculars.

A few seconds passed.

A few dozen seconds passed.

As time silently passed, the young man’s eyebrows finally made a slow movement.

They formed a displeased look.

“Those bastards… Those bastards!!”

♦

As she sat in the driver’s seat and held the steering wheel that was the size of a fair-sized side table, Itsuwa heard a voice as loud as an explosion.

She grimaced slightly.

It was similar to wearing high quality headphones, so Tsushima did not seem able to hear it from where she navigated in the passenger seat. Itsuwa checked the side mirrors and saw no change to the expressions of Tatemiya, Ushibuka, and the others who were clinging to the side of the truck like rush hour in Southeast Asia.

“You bastards! Damn you!! How can you call yourselves magicians!? How could you purposefully choose a route passing by hospitals and student dorms to *use them as shields*!?”

“Sorry, but our circumstances require this. If you understand, please sit idly by and watch. If you attack us, it will cause a giant explosion. Even if you use a mental attack to knock me unconscious, I will lose control and the morning papers will be talking about the tanker truck that ran into a humanitarian facility.”

Using normal people as a shield was far removed from the normal thought patterns of the Amakusas.

However, this would cause no trouble as long as the Anglicans did not attack.

That meant this moment was the most important one.

[1] Kodoku is a form of Japanese curse. Insects would be placed in a jar so they would kill each other and the last surviving one would be used to create the curse.

She had to attack and defend with her words.

“Don’t joke around about this!!” cried the voice.

“Ahh, ahh. Yes, yes. By the way, taxis and trucks are equipped with cameras these days. I would expect nothing less of a city of security cameras like London. It’s like a mobile surveillance network. If you do anything unnecessary and cause a disaster, it might spread beyond the London papers and into the entire world. If you make a mistake like that, will the Anglican Church cover for you?”

They had of course destroyed the tanker truck’s onboard camera when they stole it, but the bell tower magician had no way of knowing that.

He could likely come up with a means of putting a stop to this shallow cleverness eventually, but the Amakusas only needed to buy a few dozen minutes.

Yes.

They simply needed to reach the city library as quickly as possible and capture the true culprits who were using the free pass to steal a grimoire.

“You villains!!”

“You can shout all you like, but keep in mind that we have nothing restricting us from attacking you. If you don’t cut off this headache-inducing communication method, we’ll be able to calculate out the cause and effect and reach the curse behind it.”

The man’s voice cut out along with some malicious static that stabbed into Itsuwa’s temple.

The barrier had been removed.

The path to the city library had opened up before them.

Part 7

The magician Freadia Strikers arrived at the city library along with the Necessarius reinforcements of Flack Anchors and his men.

The building itself was not all that large.

It was the kind of square three-story building made of stone that was common in London. Even a cheap apartment for students would have more personality. The library had been created to naturally and casually retrieve dangerous grimoires from the public at large in the form of rare book donations. It had been designed to blend into its surroundings.

Because it was disguised as a public facility, it had no lights on after nine at night.

However, Freadia and the others did not need light. They had decided the darkness was where they would live. Anyone who was afraid of the dark was not the type that should set foot into their field of work.

Flack asked a curt question while barely moving his mouth.

“Where is the repair room?”

“On the eastern end of the second floor. The door is labeled staff only.”

“I want to avoid falling for our own traps. Where are they?”

“They have been stopped. Feel free to go on in.”

Hearing that, Flack lightly waved a hand to give his men an order. They and Flack swiftly ran toward the staircase to the second floor. Freadia could hear no footsteps. These were the movements of people used to attacking at night.

As Freadia walked slowly after them, she focused on the long, narrow duralumin cases Flack and the others held.

While surrounded by silence so pure it hurt her ears, she stroked the old crystal radio hidden in her bag. She looked toward the carpet at her feet.

(I don’t see any footprints.)

She had not expected to see dark muddy footprints. However, the carpet barely had a single wrinkle. The few marks she did see likely belonged to Flack Anchors and his men.

She walked up the stairs, turned around at the landing, and continued on up.

The number of steps was looped based on a numerical cipher to produce a trap where the staircase continued eternally like pi. There was no trace of that trap having been broken. Had the enemy not passed through here or had they passed through without triggering it like someone stepping over a tripwire?

(Were they intent on leaving no trace? It’s almost like they were ignoring the safest plan.)

She arrived at the second floor.

The light of the nightscape coming in through the window vaguely illuminated the entire hallway. Flack waved at her from in front of the door to the repair room. He did not appear to be tense. Had he already eliminated the criminals or…?

“They are not here,” said Flack plainly. “To know for sure we need to check with the librarians here, but there are no obvious signs of a disturbance. The enemy has likely not arrived yet.”

“What…?”

Freadia pushed past him and stuck her head into the half-opened door to view the repair room that smelled of old paper.

It was a small room. A work table and chairs were located in the center and bookshelves covered one wall. At first glance, it looked like books had been chaotically placed on those shelves, but the arrangement actually prevented the fewer than twenty original grimoires from autonomously activating. The originals’ ability to recognize themselves had been confused by placing them next to a large number of decoys shaped like grimoires. Grimoires would try to indiscriminately spread their information, but blurring the line between what the grimoire viewed as itself and what it viewed as something else prevented the book from determining how far it should send its information into a subject. This caused it to spin its wheels without accomplishing anything.

Of course, if a dangerous original grimoire could be fully controlled like that, the famous grimoire library known as the Index Librorum Prohibitorum would never have been put together.

“So the traps showed no sign of being released because the enemy hadn’t made it this far yet? That’s great if true. We can just wait for the Amakusas to arrive and…”

Freadia trailed off as a question suddenly entered the back of her mind.

The enemy had not yet arrived?

Freadia had assumed the enemy was already a few steps ahead of them from the point of the special entrance exam. And the enemy would surely try to defend that lead with everything they had. Freadia and the hounds of the Anglican Church were of course doing everything they could, but it just did not add up. Where had they filled the gap and then overtaken the Amakusas? When she thought back over her actions, she could not think of a single candidate.

But what did that mean?

“Wait…”

Freadia pulled her head out from the half-opened door and began to speak to Flack.

But something else arrived before she could.

A tremendously heavy impact struck Freadia Strikers in the back of the head.

Magicians could control rules that exceeded the laws of physics, but they were still human. They would take damage when struck on the head with a blunt weapon. If it was a hard enough strike, strength would leave their limbs and they would collapse to the floor.

“Gh…bah…!?”

After falling to the floor, Freadia immediately realized who had attacked her.

In this situation, it could not have been an outsider.

“Fla…ck…!!”

The weapon had been the duralumin case in his hand. He undid the latch, opened the case like a bivalve, and unhesitatingly pulled out a weapon.

It was not a sword or a wand.

Freadia had earlier assumed it was one of those two things, but she had been wrong.

(A gun…?)

It was a spiritual item modeled after a large hunting rifle with a wooden stock. However, the mechanism had been made into a rotating cylinder like that of a revolver.

Flack slid the cylinder to the side to open it, pulled some brass rifle bullets out by holding them between his five fingers, and placed them inside one by one.

“After obtaining the free pass, how could the enemy make their way through the strict surveillance of London to reach the city library? There is one simple method.”

“You had me lead you here!?”

“It is not difficult in a giant organization that works internationally and specializes in jobs that can leave no records. There are plenty of people who do the same job as you but that you have never seen.”

Yes.

Today was the first day Freadia Strikers had met Flack Anchors. That was why she had readily accepted his introduction.

And when resolving complicated incidents, it was not unusual for Necessarius members to meet a wide variety of people. They would sometimes unofficially hire one of these personal acquaintances and bring them along on a job.

Even if the security cameras and magicians throughout the city saw Flack, they would also see Freadia, an official member of Necessarius, walking alongside him without issue. They would assume Flack's group were magicians she had hired for this job.

They had another free pass.

That was Freadia herself.

There had never been any records of a magician named Flack Anchors. That was the truth.

"Dammit! Then when I used the communication spell in my crystal radio back at the Underground station…?"

"If you're only now beginning to suspect the operator, I take it you haven't figured out *what exactly happened* during that entrance exam. You are simply too late."

The operator who had introduced Flack had also been someone else. That had been an enemy magician prepared to deceive Freadia Strikers.

With a metallic click, Flack slid back the fully-loaded cylinder.

But this weapon was in the hands of a magician, so it would be more than a device that used gunpowder to fire a bullet. It would be made to draw out a much nastier magical phenomenon.

"Explosive augmentation, 75cc."

An odd sound similar to a much louder heartbeat burst out.

Several crimson lines covered the entire hunting rifle in Flack's hand by following the wooden portions. Freadia struggled when she saw that. Strength had yet to recover to her limbs. Even so, she undid the clasp on her handbag and reached for the dial of the old crystal radio.

"Blood is the symbol of atonement and consecration."

At almost point black range, Flack looked down at Freadia through the sight of that hunting rifle which had no scope.

She gasped for breath while focusing on tuning the crystal radio.

“Our Lord used that shed blood to wash away mankind’s sins. Occasionally, the scars heal and are transmitted to the believers. This became known as stigmata.”

He did not hesitate.

The deep sound of the gunshot burst out and filled the dark library.

Part 8

At that moment, the giant tanker truck that Itsuwa was driving and the Amakusas were clinging to the sides and top of burst through the steel gate protecting the city library. Before the large vehicle had come to a complete stop, Tatemiya and the others jumped down to the stone-paved ground.

Itsuwa asked a question as she opened the driver’s side door.

“Wh-what was that noise!?”

“I don’t know. We can only pray no normal people were involved!!”

They all ran toward the main entrance of the building while putting together various weapons from the parts in their bags. They made swords, spears, axes, bows, etc.

The short Kouyagi asked a question as he pressed against the wall next to the door.

“The key and the trap haven’t been activated?”

“But with that gunshot, there’s definitely someone here.”

They swiftly charged into the city library.

They were headed for the repair room on the eastern side of the second floor where the grimoires were stored. Itsuwa and the others ignored all other forks on the path as they ran through the dark building.

However, they stopped before reaching the repair room.

They stopped at the stairway leading from the first floor to the second.

A bloody girl had rolled down from above.

“Explosive augmentation, 50cc.”

“…!?”

They had no time to prepare.

Someone was aiming a wooden-stocked hunting rifle from the top of the stairs. Itsuwa had instinctually tried to pick up the girl, so Tsushima grabbed Itsuwa's arms and jumped with all her strength. They gained some distance while half-falling from the landing.

The staircase turned at the midway landing, so a bullet that flew in the straight line should have been unable to target Itsuwa and the others at the bottom of the stairs.

And yet…

Some kind of crimson line bore through the air. That light bent several times like a bouncing pinball and pierced through Tsushima's right palm. Tsushima was overcome by a very bad feeling about what was to come, so she frantically shook her hand. However, the crimson line stuck to her hand like a spider web.

And then a gunshot rang out.

Destruction arrived along that line.

Tsushima's right arm was knocked backwards.

"Gah…!!"

A nail-like stake had stabbed into her palm. It resembled the thick L-shaped spikes with the head bent in one direction that were used to hold railroad rails in place. However, it was something else.

"Tsushima-san!!"

"This is…no time to be worrying about…others!!"

"Explosive augmentation, 50cc." A low male voice could be heard from the second floor. "Blood is the symbol of atonement and consecration. Our Lord used that shed blood to wash away mankind's sins. Occasionally, the scars heal and are transmitted to the believers."

(It can't be…)

A very bad feeling filled Itsuwa's head.

She knew all too well to what those words referenced.

They were related to the execution of the Son of God on the cross. The Son of God had been fixed to the cross with a metal nail driven through his right palm, his left palm, and his feet. Finally, Longinus stabbed his side with a spear. Some theories said that was to finish him off and others said it was to check to see if he was dead.

And…

In a later era, legends cropped up about scars naturally appearing in the same places on the hands, feet, and side. It was the sign of a chosen one. The bodily characteristics that allowed a Saint to draw out a portion of the Son of God's power were inaccurately known by that term in the modern magical world, but the term technically referred to stab wounds of unknown cause in those locations.

In other words…

"This became known as stigmata."

Countless crimson lines raced through the darkness.

They accurately connected to Itsuwa, Tatemiya, and the others' hands and feet.

With an explosive noise, bullets made by melting steel flew through empty space.

Part 9

On the second floor, Flack Anchors slid the revolver-style cylinder to the side and dropped the empty cartridges to the ground. He pulled out more long bullets in between his five fingers and placed them in the holes one at a time. Finally, he pushed the cylinder back.

"That was faster than expected," was his curt assessment of his enemies.

The men standing behind him held identical hunting rifles. Flack began down the staircase with his men following behind. He ignored Freadia on the landing and continued down.

The Amakusas had arrived faster than expected.

Assuming the Anglicans did not eliminate them, he had been expecting to run across the Amakusas somewhere, but he had not predicted this timing.

Also, they had reacted to the initial attack quite fast. He had sent Freadia rolling down the stairs so he could target the Amakusas while they were focused on the injured girl. He had assumed that would take out at least one of them, but it had not actually stopped them. They had immediately responded to the threat and escaped downstairs.

"But they cannot escape these bullets."

Hiding behind cover or moving at high speed would not allow one to escape from Flack's bullets.

This was not that sort of attack.

“Explosive augmentation, 25cc.”

A sound like a strengthened heartbeat rang out.

While raising the hammer with his thumb, Flack arrived at the first floor corridor.

“They are not here.”

He moved the rifle and rotated his body from the right to the left as he looked across the corridor.

He already had the grimoire which was their primary objective. However, it would hinder their future actions if they let the Amakusas escape; the Amakusas’ ability to search out an enemy was too high. Even if it strayed from the original plan somewhat, they needed to eliminate the hiding Amakusas.

♦

Itsuwa was in the dark first floor of the city library.

Quite a few bookcases were lined up in that vast space. Those bookcases would hide them, but they could not be used as walls to deflect bullets. Also, they were not set up like a maze, so it would be difficult to hide within them for long.

“…Kh…”

Tsushima, who stood next to her, had not removed the nail from her right hand.

They had scattered and hidden, but Ushibuka and Isahaya had been injured as well. It had been either their palm or their ankle. They must have been able to ignore the rule of one gunshot firing a single nail because several of the Amakusas had been injured at the same time.

(Think.)

Itsuwa held her breath while leaning against a bookcase and holding her spear in both hands.

Oddly enough, she was uninjured.

(Magic is a theory. Magic is a technique. Magic is knowledge. There are always rules governing the phenomena. There are never mere coincidences. There has to be a reason Tsushima-san was attacked and I wasn’t!!)

“Gh… It looked like that was a method of making an attack out of the stigmata that appear on the executed Son of God and other believers.”

To prevent excessive bleeding, Tsushima was not removing the nail. Instead, she had tied a handkerchief tightly around the palm.

“But this is not the true nail used to execute the Son of God. There have been enough nails found claiming to be real that you could make a land reclamation out of them. This man is a magician who used that fact to instantly produce a large number of nails.”

This was another side of magic.

A single miraculous item could be analyzed and then mass produced. Gathering mysteries that anyone could reach could help one reach out toward new areas no one had ever reached before.

And in that case…

The enemy magician was making simple scraps of metal look like those legendary nails so his enemy would completely misread his trick.

“Before attacking, he muttered something about a number of ccs. That was probably adding in his own blood. I don’t know if it’s the power, the range, or the accuracy, but the amount he offers up boosts it.”

Bloody nails.

Scraps of metal that gained special meaning by having a holy person’s blood poured over them.

That was one quick method of using that symbol.

It seemed the magician himself represented the holy person and pouring his blood on the nails turned them into weapons.

“By building the execution ceremony into the spell, the process kills the magic user himself. He has to be using some trick to get around that. …It’s the blood. He creates confusion between his blood with the target’s. When he pulls the trigger and completes the execution ceremony, the concept behind it is swapped out so that *it is our blood being used and it is our life that will be taken.* Just like how the stigmata appear on normal believers instead of just the Son of God. But that also means…”

“If we figure out where that distortion occurs and fix that twisted part…”

“The execution ceremony should attack the person whose blood was actually used. If we can do that, we can reverse our hopeless situation!!”

They then heard a creaking noise.

Itsuwa and Tsushima fell silent.

Someone had stepped into the library.

Their chances were limited. It would be difficult to produce decent teamwork with Tsushima since she was injured. The bookcases would hide them to a certain extent, but it was all over as soon as the enemy sensed their presence. Those bullets were not something that could be avoided by hiding behind something.

And so…

Instead of charging out randomly, Itsuwa waited. She waited and waited. She held her spear as if embracing it, held her breath, and remained perfectly still.

And she thought.

The girl who had rolled down to the staircase landing had still been breathing. Given the situation, she had likely been an Anglican magician rather than a normal person. But why had she been alive when she had been attacked before Itsuwa and the others arrived?

The enemy magician was not alone. He seemed to have several subordinates with him. And those subordinates held identical hunting rifles. If the man had a rifle that could accurately hit its target no matter where they ran or hid, what did he need those subordinates for?

And most importantly, Itsuwa and Tsushima had put together an estimate of the enemy's attack method, but where had their information come from?

(It can't be…)

She heard hard footsteps approaching the other side of the neat lines of bookcases.

If the magician wanted, he could silence his footsteps, but he purposefully kept them loud as if waiting for his prey to charge out at him.

(It can't be.)

♦

Flack Anchors held his hunting rifle while walking through the library. He focused all of his senses on his surroundings and thought.

(The execution of the Son of God. The legends of those nails being mass produced around the world. The execution and stigmata. Pieces of metal covered in blood. If you try to work out the details of this spell from there, you will never reach the truth.)

Even if they held savage weapons in their hands and even if the magicians began grappling each other, the true essence of magic combat was the intellectual side. For that reason, one could say the battle had already begun before the actual clash came.

And…

Flack Anchors had laid out all of his pieces perfectly. It was the same as laying out one's chess pieces according to a pattern that had been proven to achieve certain victory. It was impossible for the Amakusas to reverse the situation now. Flack had crushed all of his enemy's possibilities to ensure that was the case.

(As long as they cannot determine what spell we are using, our victory is certain. And determining that is impossible. …The board has been set up perfectly.)

Part 10

There is no way to achieve your dream.

If you were told that, what would you do next?

What were a person's choices upon learning the magic name carved into their heart was misguided or learning the driving force behind their life as a magician was false?

Would they continue to train themselves and deny those prophetic words despite knowing it was hopeless?

Would they give up on their dream, compromise, and search for their next goal?

Both may have been correct answers.

Or perhaps there was no answer.

However…

Flack Anchors—or the magician who had given that name—could never choose the latter.

His reason for that was quite simple.

He had already spoken of his dream. And a large number of people who had decided to follow him to that dream had given their lives and futures to him in the form of subordinates.

Flack was the captain of a ship and that dream was the compass he needed to navigate the stormy seas.

If he lost that compass's needle, his ship would be lost. He would never arrive on land again. And so Flack had been unable to cast aside that dream he had initially spoken of. He could not haphazardly abandon that compass.

But at the same time, there was no point in ignoring reality and repeating futile efforts. That was the same as a ship attempting to circumnavigate the globe with no supplies. Everyone aboard the ship would dry up.

Both the former option and latter option could not save him.

And so Flack had been forced to create a third option.

It was a simple matter.

Flack Anchors could not reach the dream he had spoken of. But the world was a large place. There were plenty of magicians who thought the same things he did. And some of those people had to be much more powerful than he was.

If Flack could not achieve it, he simply had to apprentice himself to a more powerful magician who was headed in the same direction.

Flack only had to give that magician's back a push, become a stepping stone for them, and allow them to grasp that same dream.

He only had to cast aside his cheap pride. He would reach out toward that dream even if he had to fake his name and lie about his affiliations. This was no longer Flack Anchors's problem alone. With those countless people following him, he had to bring his shoddy ship to their destination.

He did not care if his methods were considered heretical.

Even if his methods were considered evil, Flack Anchors had something he had to accomplish.

"Let's go," muttered Flack in a quiet, low voice as he adjusted his grip on the wooden-stocked hunting rifle. "We will kill our enemies and continue forward. We need not hesitate."

Part 11

She made up her mind and took action in an instant. As Itsuwa leaned against one of the bookcases and waited for the time to attack, she heard the volume of the footsteps exceed a certain limit. Using that as a signal, she charged out with her spear in hand. The enemy was further away than she had expected. The enemy magicians were seven meters from

her. Even taking the length of her spear into consideration, she still needed to take two steps.

The enemy was in a group.

The same large man stood at the front. Just under ten young men stood behind him.

Whether due to the distance or their absolute confidence in their spell, the men showed no concern when Itsuwa suddenly charged out. They aimed their rifles smoothly. Itsuwa lowered her hips and tried to aim at the large man's chest from below, but they were targeting her face perfectly.

(If that girl who fell down the stairs fought these enemy magicians before we arrived, there has to be meaning in the fact that she is still alive. *These magicians are not using magic that prepares a large number of bullets to physically tear apart their target.*)

An instant of time seemed to stretch out forever.

Itsuwa distinctly felt her bent knees and the groan of her creaking leg muscles.

(If those rifles had the ability to attack all targets simultaneously regardless of how many bullets were loaded and those shots are impossible to avoid or defend against, just the one man would have been enough. *He would have no reason to keep these subordinates with him.*)

Itsuwa assumed the presence of those subordinates meant there was some reason he had to have them with him. And that pointed toward the rifles being important. The large man who was in charge was not the only one with one. Everyone there had one of those spiritual items.

(Our estimated details of the enemy's spell are nothing more than guesses based on what the enemy said himself. And he has no reason to give us that information. *In fact, he should want to act so as not to reveal anything about the structure of his spell.*)

"And all that means…!!"

Itsuwa took her final action.

Even if she was wielding a spear, she still had two steps to take. On the other hand, those men only needed to pull the trigger. From her location, Itsuwa had no way of stopping the magicians' trigger fingers.

But she did not have to.

Itsuwa slammed the butt of the spear into the hard floor.

Two satisfying sounds overlapped each other.

Yes.

The gunshot of the enemy magicians' rifles and the sound of Itsuwa's spear overlapped.

"Your ostentatious hints related to the Son of God's execution were nothing but a bluff. The bloodsucking rifles, the nail-like bullets, and most importantly, your meaningful-sounding incantation. All of it, all of it, all of it was nothing more than a decoy meant to hide your real spell!!"

At first, unrest spread through the darkness.

The triggers of the rifles were pulled once more, but Itsuwa only had to match the timing. She slammed her spear against the floor, the pillars, or the bookcases to produce a loud sound to cover up the gunshot. That robbed their attack of all meaning. That girl's soft skin looked as if a single bamboo leaf could cut it, but it remained perfectly unscathed.

"The sound was what truly mattered!! Your spell attacked anyone who heard a special sound! You prepared multiple sound-producing metal tubes in the form of gun barrels to freely produce consecrated chords. Your rifle and your subordinates' rifles form a pipe organ together. That is why you have an absolute form of attack yet are forced to keep your subordinates with you!!"

During the strategy meeting in the Chinatown food warehouse, Tatemiya and the others had said the Anglicans could crush all of the magicians over a wide area with the magical effects of ringing the bells of the churches throughout the city.

These magicians used a downsized version of that.

They held it in their hands in a form that was not recognizable as musical instruments.

"You produce chords based on precise calculations, so you wanted to avoid having people match your timing. After all, your attack loses all effect if its balance is thrown off by some added noise."

The girl who had rolled down the stairs had likely succeeded in that to a certain extent. She may have been a magician who used some kind of instrument or speaker. Her enemies had been unable to kill her no matter how many times they attacked, so they had given up.

When retreating from the staircase landing, the nail had targeted Tsushima instead of Itsuwa. That too may have been related to sound somehow. For example, when Tsushima had acted as a shield for Itsuwa, the sound meant for her may not have transferred to her correctly. Or perhaps being swung around had distorted her body's perception of the sound.

“To hide this fact, you added in elements to make us think the rifles were taking your blood and that it was related to the Son of God’s execution and stigmata. If we made misguided guesses about your spell, you didn’t have to worry about us interfering with it!!”

And so Itsuwa made up her mind and acted in an instant.

Now that she had sealed their attacks, Itsuwa had nothing to fear. She took the shortest and quickest route by almost taking a low leap toward the large magician more than running. By taking a single step back, he honestly admitted his attack had lost its effectiveness.

His subordinates moved forward to fill the gap.

They acted as his shield.

He was likely waiting to attack until Itsuwa stopped moving even for an instant. The rifle seemed to be the large man’s only weapon, but there were several traps prepared to protect the grimoires in the city library. They seemed to have been deactivated, but he might be able to turn Itsuwa and his subordinates into mincemeat by interfering with them.

However…

It all came down to an instant.

The situation did not allow any unnecessary movements.

An explosive noise burst out. By the time the large man turned toward the noise, his vision was already filled with the large bookcase that flew through the air. The loud sound of a collision was followed by the sound of wood cracking and the sound of books falling to the floor.

While holding her spear up cautiously, Itsuwa looked in the direction the bookcase had flown from.

She found Tatemiya holding an undulating sword after having sent the library wall and the bookcase attached to it flying through the air.

He looked down at the magician crushed below the bookcase and he spoke.

“You’re not the only ones who can work as a team. Did you not know that?”

Part 12

Itsuwa and others had defeated the magicians who had stolen the free pass by slipping into the Amakusas' special entrance exam, used that free pass to attack the city library, and stolen a grimoire there. The entire incident appeared to be resolved.

The free pass was something like a type of spoken spell. It was similar to a password in normal society, so it could not be taken back. However, no more trouble would be caused if those who knew it were captured and handed over to the Anglicans.

Itsuwa pulled a leather-bound book from the pocket of the large magician pinned between the bookcase and the floor.

"…?"

The cover had some kind of writing on it, but not even an expert magician like Itsuwa could read it.

As Tatemiya peered over at it from the side, he spoke a name with a skeptical look on his face.

"The Necronomicon…"

"What?"

"No, don't turn your questions to me. Complain to the person who made it."

Tatemiya lightly pointed at the cover made of leather. When Itsuwa thought about it, she realized she had no idea *what kind of animal skin had been used.*

"In the stories, I think the original name was Al Azif. But right here it says N-E-C-R-O-N-O-M-I-C-O-N. …Do you get what I mean?"

"This is not a copy that's information deteriorated in the process of reproducing an original. It is truth taken from lies. Or rather, it was known to be based in fiction, but a grimoire of a brand new system was created by thoroughly coating it with real theories and formulas. Is that what you mean?"

There were stories(?) known as the Cthulhu Mythos.

They had been created by a single genius author, but as if they were a living thing, they had been treated like a real mythology when many later authors began using them in their own stories.

There may have been a magician who found that amusing.

Or perhaps there had been a magician who had truly wished to see the world described in those stories with his own eyes.

Someone had searched through the different magic systems throughout the world and perfectly calculated out what was needed to recreate the despair-inducing events written of in the Cthulhu Mythos. This person had written a book filled with the spells that gave free control over that and secretly sent that book out into the world.

That was the identity of the Necronomicon in the field of magic.

This book could fill the world with the horrors that were meant to remain within that fictional world that had created such enjoyable fear.

“Even the Rosicrucian movement which forms the foundation of modern Western magic had its beginnings in a false book a single person wrote. …But the field of magic did not let it stop there. When that author later revealed the truth to the world, he was completely ignored. As many real magicians joined in and worked out the details, the era no longer needed the original author. The term Rosicrucianism continued to grow even though the man supposedly at the center of the movement had been ostracized.”

“It is an original yet not an original. It is a grimoire that began with a lie.” Itsuwa looked back down at the leather-bound book in her hand. “What were they trying to do with this?”

“I don’t know, but it couldn’t have been anything fun. Or maybe I should say it would have been destructively fun? At any rate, it’s a good thing we put an end to this before they could enact any of the things written in here.”

They did not know the exact number of the enemy’s group, so it was possible some remnant still remained.

But there was only one copy of the grimoire known as the Necronomicon. Unless they had performed a simultaneous attack on the grimoire library known as Index where she lived in Japan’s Academy City, it was impossible for them to use the Necronomicon for some large-scale magical ceremony.

The incident had come to an end.

Thinking that, Itsuwa’s shoulders relaxed. But then she spotted something unpleasant.

It was blood.

The large man pinned unconscious between the bookcase and the floor had fresh red blood flowing form his mouth and nose.

“Wait a second! We kind of overdid this, didn’t we!?” asked Tatemiya while half-panicked.

“No…”

The presence of an unpleasant pressure grew in Itsuwa's head. They had overlooked something. And then she spotted the spiritual item lying next to the large man.

It was that hunting rifle.

It was that weapon that used sound to drive out evil like a cathedral pipe organ.

The sound was filled with magical meaning and rung across a large area to produce an unavoidable attack.

However…

(That's right. The gunshots spread evenly in every direction, so we wouldn't be the only ones who could hear them.)

If the enemy magicians had been able to freely add information into that sound…

If they had a technique to transmit data over long distances by adding that data into the wavelengths like was done with electromagnetic waves…

"Tatemiya-san, this blood is not from an external attack!!"

"What? Then what is it…?"

"This is from the original grimoire. This is the side effect of reading that high concentration of toxic information!!"

"…"

Tatemiya looked at Itsuwa with a look that said, "Please be kidding."

Itsuwa shook her head.

"In the off chance their plan was stopped, they added in a safety measure despite their advantage. In other words, they pretended to be fighting us while actually *transmitting the contents of the Necronomicon to their comrades* by using the sound!!"

"Wait. Hold up. You mean if someone somewhere received that sound and puts it back into the form of a book, the enemy will still have an accurate copy of the Necronomicon!?"

In a way, the situation had progressed well for the enemy.

There was something they wanted to do even if it meant picking a fight with the Anglican Church. And they still had that something which could become a large-scale magical ceremony.

However…

Who were they?

Where did one have to go and what did one have to pursue to find them?

"…We've lost the trail," muttered Tatemiya while dumbfounded.

The large magician who had seemed the leader and his subordinates had all been taken out by the grimoire's poison. Even severe torture would be useless when they were unconscious. It was a bit of a gamble as to how useful magic to peer inside their heads would be.

The odds of receiving any new information from these defeated enemies were close to zero.

Which meant…

"We've completely lost the narrow trail leading to who has the Necronomicon, haven't we!?"

Part 13

A small refrigerated truck with a penguin illustration on the side had had its refrigeration equipment removed. Several figures sat within instead.

The famous Westminster Abbey towered up next to the refrigerated truck, but they were not sightseers.

"These large-scale facilities are nice," said someone. "They're always leaking a lot of power. That power they scatter around prevents the Anglican investigation from detecting us here. We can use really suspicious spells right here in London and they will never notice."

No voice came in response.

With a thud, the girl sitting next to the speaker collapsed to the side.

A middle aged man was already similarly collapsed on the refrigerated truck's floor.

Those subordinates had analyzed the Necronomicon data received via the gunshots of the assassin who had headed to the city library under the name of Flack Anchors. Those subordinates had converted that data back into a book.

They were all very skilled magicians.

However, the one remaining person did not lament this loss of skilled subordinates.

Skilled subordinates only had any meaning once they produced results. The more skilled they were, the greater the results they could produce, but that also meant the greatest genius was worth nothing if he left this world without leaving anything behind. A chicken's value was in the eggs it laid.

"Now I have the Necronomicon."

This person moved to the front of the refrigerated truck and lightly knocked on the wall separating that space from the driver. With the data received, the truck smoothly left Westminster Abbey.

The person smiled quietly while the truck headed to the next destination.

"It all begins here."

CHAPTER 3

Part 1

The enemy had escaped.

Itsuwa and the other Amakusas had successfully defeated Flack Anchors's group which had targeted the Necronomicon grimoire stored in the city library. However, Flack had read the Necronomicon during the battle and transmitted it to his comrades outside the library using the sound wave signal of his group's gunshots.

It was unknown who the text had been sent to or where they were.

The incident was moving out of Itsuwa and the others' reach. Unless the mastermind was simply trying to collect rare books, this would transform into an indescribably major incident. That grimoire had been created from a crucible of realistic methods to create the horrors that were meant to remain in the realm of fiction.

The single incident surrounding the free pass was over.

However, it had led to another much greater incident. And if great damage was done, the Amakusas could possibly be blamed.

Also, they could not ignore this if a ceremony was being prepared which could harm an unknown number of people. After all, the grimoire that had been partially leaked out was said to allow one to almost perfectly recreate the things spoken of in the Cthulhu mythos. Those phenomena could be described as horror on a universal scale, so an entire city or country could be destroyed if they were released into the world.

"Honestly, we can only pray this is from a new era that has branched off. If it's from the original era, humans have no chance of winning," said Tatemiya in annoyance within the city library.

The direct combat was over, so they were performing first aid. They had not quite set up a field hospital, but they had created an odd space in which collapsible camping goods were spread out.

Itsuwa was unharmed, so she immediately used recovery magic to heal Tsushima's hand.

“More importantly, we need to find a way to pursue whoever received the Necronomicon.”

“How are we supposed to do that with no hint whatsoever?” asked Tsushima with a frown.

But Itsuwa shook her head.

“We do have a hint.”

“?”

“The enemy used their gunshots to send the Necronomicon data to their comrades bit by bit, but we don’t know if they really needed the entire Necronomicon. They might only need a few pages to accomplish their goal.” Itsuwa chose her words carefully. “Even if they transmitted the entire book evenly to disguise what they needed, they would still be extra careful when transmitting the important pages. If we can analyze the inconsistencies in their actions and locate the moments they found important, couldn’t we determine what chapters and passages they were focused on?”

“We may not know how large a group this enemy is, but they must have a fair bit of power if they’re willing to pick a fight with the Anglican Church. This may not be their first time. They may have tried a few large-scale magical experiments in the past and only then realized they were lacking a piece the Necronomicon could fill. And in that case…”

“There might be records of magicians focused on the Cthulhu mythos in the Anglican Church’s records of past incidents?”

The Cthulhu mythos was well known.

There would of course be plenty of magicians involved.

But if they analyzed the gunshot signal and determined what pages of the Necronomicon the enemy found important, they might be able to take the list of countless magicians and narrow it down to the one they wanted.

“It sounds simple,” began the short boy named Kouyagi. “But looking through those records means we have to sneak into an Anglican church or cathedral, doesn’t it? Or break our way in by force, I suppose. But either option is unrealistic. We don’t have the strength.”

“Well, it is true we can’t check the Anglican records from a distance like hacking into a computer.”

“U-um, that girl who fell down the staircase is most likely an Anglican magician, right? What if we explain the situation to her?”

“Do you think she has any reason to listen to our explanation? She’ll see us as the ones behind this or at least accomplices.”

Itsuwa, Tsushima, and the others must have felt saying anything further was meaningless because they fell silent.

However, this was not a situation where silence was another way of expressing oneself.

Someone had to give an idea to at least get things started.

“Tatemiya-san.”

“What is it?”

“Necessarius members will be breaking into this library before long, won’t they? Do you have a way of safely hiding ourselves before that?”

“Well, if a one-time use method is fine, I know a few including a sewer route. I would prefer saving those methods until we have a proper plan, though.”

Tatemiya’s casual comment was surprising, but Tsushima bluntly cut in while having her wound treated.

“Don’t be too impressed, Itsuwa. A lot of his ideas are stupid things like throwing you out into the nighttime London streets in a slingshot swimsuit and having everyone else escape while focus is on you.”

“……”

Itsuwa began to seriously wonder when and where that kind of strategy meeting was held.

If she knew that, the great demon god Itsuwa would make an appearance and destroy it all. However, she knew causing a fuss here would accomplish nothing, so she returned to the topic at hand while swearing to herself she would get back at them later.

“I think all of you heard the gunshots themselves. We need to know when and where were the shots fired and how many were fired. How much time will it take to discuss it between ourselves and recreate it via role playing?”

“Assuming the men aren’t too incompetent, it should only take five to ten minutes. But won’t that lack the accuracy we need to analyze it? And even if it is accurate, I don’t want to dig into original grimoire knowledge with no defenses in place.”

“We only need to know what pages, chapters, or passages to focus on.”

Itsuwa let go of Tsushima's hand now that the magical treatment was complete.

This was not enough to perfectly close the wound, but movement of the index, middle, and ring fingers might have been lost otherwise, so this was better than nothing.

She lightly brushed her free hand across her cheek.

"The special entrance exam in the abandoned Underground was nothing more than a decoy created to obtain the free pass. The Anglican Church was unaware what was going on. So what if those traps were all prepared by the group behind this?"

"Wait, Itsuwa. What are you planning to do?" asked Tatemiya.

Instead of answering, Itsuwa approached the magicians collapsed on the library floor and dug through their pockets.

She smiled at what she found.

"If we can analyze this, we might have a way of escaping this situation."

Part 2

"Gh…"

The Anglican magician named Freadia Strikers groaned as she came to. For the first few seconds, she could not remember what had happened, but she jumped up shortly thereafter.

She was in the city library's stairway.

(What happened?)

She grimaced at the dull pain spreading from her right palm. She looked down and saw her entire palm wrapped in bandages. She doubted Flack Anchors would have done that, but then who had?

She thought and grimaced for a reason other than the pain.

Freadia pulled the old crystal radio from her handbag and began investigating the library once more. She first checked on the repair room where the dangerous grimoires were stored. She looked around and was surprised to find it untouched.

Had Flack left without stealing anything?

Or had someone else retrieved the grimoire and returned everything to normal?

(I don't sense anyone around here.)

She did not know how long she had passed out for. She did not even know if she had been fully unconscious the entire time. She concentrated and recalled some vague, intermittent memories of Flack fighting some Asians. Without their interference, Freadia may have been killed.

(But what exactly is going on?)

Had they been split between enemy and ally?

Or had it ben infighting between her enemies?

Conflicts in reality were not simple enough to ensure that the enemy of an enemy was a friend. Until she knew what the Amakusas were after, she would have to think of them as an enemy organization.

She found Flack Anchors on the first floor of the city library.

He was already unconscious and the rifle spiritual item lying next to him was completely broken. His men were collapsed nearby as well. All of them had their hands bound by electric cables and other impromptu bonds.

Unless they were trying to kill themselves, Flack and his group would not do this on their own.

Which meant…

"The Amakusas. Is this supposed to be a moving-in present?"

It seemed the Amakusas had already escaped the library and Freadia did not know what their goal was. They appeared to be helping her, but that was not enough to trust them. She could not just ignore them.

Freadia place her crystal radio on the floor, set the dial, and prepared to contact the Anglican Church, but she stopped her hand as she turned the familiar dial.

Flack had used this communication method against her.

"Maybe I should use a different method," she muttered in slight annoyance as she glanced around.

Surely even an old library would have a phone.

Part 3

The Anglican magicians arrived at the city library while disguised as garbage men. The standard for this sort of situation was an ambulance, but they would need too many ambulances with this many people and a line of ambulances would stand out quite a bit. People would think it was a terrorist attack or the like, so they would pay careful attention.

Garbage trucks were more convenient in that sense. They could approach any building at any time without suspicion. And unlike police cars or fire trucks, young children would not wave at them.

The Necessarius members placed Flack Anchors and his men on stretchers and quickly carried them to the trucks.

They were headed for one of Necessarius's bases.

It was a facility known as Sword Sanctuary.

Rather than taking the name of an important historical figure, this sanctuary took the name of an object. Swords and spears that had broken in a godly fight would be brought to that small building to be "cared for" in their final moments. Worshiping objects was supposedly heretical, but in every age, the masses dreamed of holy swords and holy grails. Forcing them away from such things would only build up dissatisfaction, so this sanctuary was allowed as a means of venting some of that. Or at least, that was the religious explanation for why it was allowed.

At any rate, professional magicians knew of the sanctuary as a customizing facility that would retune spiritual items that were powerful but held the risk of killing their user.

Several trucks entered the facility's grounds.

One door opened and Freadia stepped out and a man spoke to her. He remained in Sword Sanctuary at all times and usually spoke with weapons more often than humans.

"We don't handle humans here. I can think of a way to create arrowheads out of human bone, though."

"Just bring them inside."

"Aren't these magical criminals? Why not throw them in London Tower?"

"There are too many unknowns in how they were captured. If I filled out the application now, it wouldn't be accepted. The jailers there will find any reason they can to deny new prisoners."

“I guess the prisons are full no matter where you go. I can see why prisons are becoming privately run these days.”

“Children are slaughtered by their parents and the elderly die alone in their apartments, but prisoners are well fed with the county’s tax money. This is truly a lovely world we live in.”

Flack Anchors and his men were carried into the stone sanctuary on stretchers. From the outside, the building did not look very valuable. The true facility existed underground where it spread out like an ant colony.

The customization worker cracked his neck before speaking.

“I don’t care if you leave them here, but drawing out information isn’t my specialty. When torturing someone, you can’t have them die before you get any information and you can’t have them telling lies to escape the pain and fear. That kind of delicate psychological warfare isn’t my area of expertise.”

“It doesn’t matter if they’re alive or dead. As long as we can get the information we need, you can turn them into talking guns for all I care.”

“Now that I can get excited about. …Hm? You aren’t going to stick around?”

Freadia waved one hand at the customization worker’s question.

It was the hand wrapped in bandages.

“I have to deal with this. That isn’t your specialty, right?”

“If I did it, I’d add a drill to your hand.”

Freadia waved her hand again but this time as if she were shooing away a dog.

“If you figure anything out or give up, contact me.”

“Sure thing.”

Freadia entered the aboveground portion of the sanctuary and the customization worker continued down to the underground structure. Sword Sanctuary did in fact have an area to deal with people. However, it was mainly meant to analyze corpses with horrible wounds to determine what spiritual item had caused the damage. That information would then be used to help further their research.

The customization worker saw about ten magicians lined up on the floor ahead of him.

Whether he was planning to torture them or draw the information out of their heads, he first had to carefully exam their physical condition. This was done to “preserve their

health", but not to ensure their happiness. He had to know the upper limits of pain they could experience without being killed.

As stated previously, Sword Sanctuary was named after a tool rather than a historical figure.

It had exceedingly few facilities for people.

During normal surgeries, saws or drills would sometimes be used on the bones of fully anesthetized patients. However, those saws and drills would be fine-tuned to be used on the human body.

Normal surgeons would never use tools meant for copper. The same could not be said for this customization worker.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far with someone we didn't know for sure was guilty. But with someone like this, it might be hard to find any reason to hold back."

The customization worker picked up a tool and approached Flack Anchors so cheerfully he looked like he was about to start humming. He crouched down and stared at the man's unmoving face.

But then something odd happened.

With a dry noise, a large crack ran through Flack's forehead.

"What is-…?"

The customization worker was cut off before he could say anything else.

Flack Anchors's chest split open, a slender hand shot out, and the hand grabbed the customization worker's neck.

Part 4

The person hiding within Flack's large body was Itsuwa of the Amakusas.

Or more accurately…

"Remember that spell using wax dolls during the decoy entrance exam?" Itsuwa had said back in the city library. "If that was prepared by the group behind this, the ones here should know how that spell worked. If we can analyze it, don't you think we could create a look-alike?"

Itsuwa had analyzed the spell and now pressed her thumb against the customization worker's carotid artery as he tried to peer down at her. After a few seconds, he passed out.

Once he collapsed to the ground, Itsuwa dug through his pockets and pulled out a key ring. She bound his hands and feet with cables to power tools and stuffed an oil-stained rag in his mouth as a gag. She left the door labeled "morgue", locked the door from the outside, and followed the signs of the underground structure that had been expanded chaotically like an ant colony.

Either everyone was gone at this time of night or only a few strange people worked in the facility because she did not run across anyone on the way. But even if she had, she doubted anyone would be too suspicious if she walked boldly by with the key ring in hand.

The facility had another morgue.

However, this morgue was not used to store corpses. This was the type of morgue that contained old newspaper articles, reports, and other documents.

She unlocked the door, entered, and locked it again from the inside.

"Now then."

The room was about the size of a tennis court, but the walls and ceiling were not of an even height. The number of bookshelves would increase as the amount of files increased and the earth would be dug out to expand the room as the number of bookshelves increased.

Itsuwa was from a country of earthquakes and hot springs, so this carelessness led her to doubt the sense of the architect.

(Come to think of it, Rome is another example of a city that has several layers of underground structures built over hundreds of years. I can't believe a country's capital city is built on top of an underground space from a time before architectural and safety standards. And that country had plenty of volcanoes, so the chance of collapse was definitely there.)

At any rate, they were receiving enough additional reports on a daily basis that some reckless construction was needed to keep up with storing it all. This demonstrated the great number of brutal magical incidents that had led to Necessarius's creation and its continued activity.

If Itsuwa randomly dug through the files in the room, she would never find what she was after.

Itsuwa had only just snuck in, but she did not have an infinite amount of time here. If someone else found the customization worker she had left in the other morgue, it would only be a matter of time before this room as surrounded.

(I hope it's organized by category.)

As Itsuwa moved toward the shelves, she spotted something odd sitting on a table.

It was an outdated computer.

"Is this to manage the archive?"

Computers were scientific objects, so Itsuwa had thought all magicians tried to keep away from them. But when she checked the computer, she realized it only contained a list of the document titles and what shelf they were stored on. The actual records were not stored on the computer.

(So how far do they have to go before they violate the treaty between magic and science?)

This may have been part of the idea that they could not survive with only the old traditional methods. Even Itsuwa used cars and bikes and she would rather not be told to use a horse (even if she could manage it).

She searched for the terms Cthulhu mythos and Necronomicon to narrow down the results. She then entered the information she had received from Tatemiya, Tsushima, and the others' analysis of the gunshot sound wave signal.

(Let's see, the most important data was transmitted on pages 45, 90-120, 200, and 210-222.)

Even the ones who had performed the analysis did not know what was written there. They could have converted it into text, but then the toxic knowledge of the original grimoire would destroy their minds. For that reason, Itsuwa had only been given the page numbers and some intermittent keywords.

Also, the Necronomicon in question had nothing to do with the legendary book Al Azif which appeared in the fictional world of a certain genius author. It only told one what was necessary to recreate every one of the hopeless situations featured in the Cthulhu mythos. It would contain the knowledge from the other books featured in the Cthulhu mythos as well as the "new horror" added by later authors after the genius author's death.

"Hm…"

She was only able to narrow it down to a few dozen entries.

For one thing, the computer only contained the titles of the stored files. It did not matter how many details she added when the information she was searching through was so limited.

Itsuwa thought for a bit and decided to check all of them.

She checked the bookshelf numbers and walked through the tennis court sized room, gathering the files she needed. She spread them out on the floor and skimmed through them.

One was about a man who used a jewel in a box in an attempt to call in someone not of this world.

One was about an enchanting female marriage scam artist who sent a yellow medallion to the person she wanted to die. That was meant to cause the person to meet an evil god and allow her to steal their magical inheritance.

One was about an old man who tried to “create” an existence that was both guardian of the gate and the gate itself so he could travel to another planet.

It was not unusual for people to have exaggerated goals that strayed from the territory of a magician. Whether those goals were ever accomplished was another issue altogether.

However, these incidents could cause great damage.

Some simply produced a large number of victims. Others had a single victim, but the method of killing them required the creation of a new classification in criminology. These incidents made one feel faint and see strange colors, but they also had a strange tendency of drawing one in. Someone with a weak mind could even be sucked in completely.

However, none of those incidents seemed related to the pages Tatemiya, Tsushima, and the others had picked up from the gunshots.

Itsuwa moved the unneeded files out of the way.

She focused on the final remaining report.

“Is this it?” she muttered without thinking.

The report contained an overview of the incident, a map of the related area, details on the suspects, and even clippings from newspapers and magazines. The one file folder had a large number of assorted papers inside. It was clearly thicker than the others.

Brightly colored tape was attached to the spine of the file folder.

Itsuwa guessed that meant the case was “unsolved”. If it was solved, she doubted they would bother gathering articles from normal newspapers and magazines. The magicians investigating the case may have been grasping at straws.

“Three years ago on August 2. In American territory on the Pacific, 103 workers went insane on the resource extraction ship Condor which was built by Luxury & Ingot, a major British resource extraction plant company. It was thought to be sabotage meant to put cracks in the diplomatic relationship between England and America as well as the international competition over the underground resource business.”

Itsuwa quickly muttered the contents under her breath.

Skimming over it normally would cause her to miss information. To quickly yet accurately grasp the information, it was better to stimulate her mind by forming the words in her mouth.

“But afterwards, identical magical symbols were found here and there throughout the ship. It has been deemed a magical incident that used a temple ceremony by cutting off the closed environment of the resource extraction ship as a miniature world and letting special rules eat into that world.”

The workers had all killed each other based on some common sense of value, so what exactly had happened was not well known.

“The colors of the Cthulhu mythos have been found within the stage. From the overall structure, the objective is thought to be the surfacing of the underwater city.”

R’lyeh was the underwater city in which the titular Cthulhu and his hordes slept. When certain conditions were met, the legend said R’lyeh would rise to the surface from the bottom of the ocean.

But when magicians used the Cthulhu mythos, it was defined as something created from nothing, so whoever caused that incident would not have thought the underwater city actually existed. Basically, someone had calculated out what coordinates were needed to call in something which should not exist and they had chosen the point in the Pacific spoken of in the mythos.

When R’lyeh surfaced, it was said the weak-minded would go insane while poets and artists would receive strange inspiration. It seemed that was the goal of the people behind it.

“Causing R’lyeh to surface was being used as a method of skipping some steps and breaking through some kind of dead end in their magical research. They had no interest in the evil god sleeping in the underwater city. They merely wanted to acquire the inspiration they needed.”

However, the reports said the plan was thought to have failed for some reason.

The primary evidence was the small number of victims. According to the simulation performed by the Anglican Church, the magical ceremony's damage would not have stopped at the ship had it succeeded. They estimated the residents of every island within a thousand kilometers would have been wiped out as well.

England's official explanation for the incident was that the weather had worsened and the continual rocking of the ship with no land in sight had pushed the workers past their psychological limits. And to ensure the same thing never happened again, an ocean plant and a giant antenna facility had been constructed in that "demonic" area of sea. They claimed that would ease the minds of the crews of any ships passing through.

This had caused a small stir in the non-magic world because it was a facility outside of England that could be used as a tactical radar system, but the leaders of the Anglican Church may have decided suspicion in the wrong direction was no problem.

"In other words, Necessarius is keeping an eye on the location."

Simply obtaining the Necronomicon was not enough to pull off the R'lyeh surfacing ceremony which had failed three years ago, but that dangerous grimoire had not been stolen for no reason. Itsuwa had to be overlooking something. The magical incident from three years ago was not over.

"Or…"

Itsuwa looked through the list of people involved in the incident. There had been a large number of victims, so most of them were crew and workers from the resource extraction ship who had nothing to do with the magic world. However, she did find information on the magician suspected to be behind it all.

A photograph was clipped to the report. She tapped her index finger at the forehead of the young man in the photograph.

And she spoke his name.

"Arlands Darkstreet."

He was the boss of the magic cabal named "Dusk Waiting to Awaken".

The cabal was made up of 150-200 people. They did not seek history in magic and instead created spells that acted as brand new bridges to deal with the weaknesses and research barriers in the existing magical systems. They had earned great rewards and connections by providing other magic cabals with those spells. Essentially, they were a magical engineering group.

The man who led them was not someone who could be ignored concerning the current incident that began with the free pass.

(I need to contact Tatemiya-san and the others.)

With that thought, Itsuwa pulled a charm from her chest.

She wanted to avoid using unnecessary magic while in the Anglican Church's home city of London, but if she understood the risks, she could come up with a plan so she was not caught.

Part 5

While receiving treatment for her wound in the aboveground portion of the sanctuary, Freadia Strikers used her still bleeding palm to strike the old crystal radio sitting next to her.

She opened the exterior, peered inside, and groaned.

"God dammit!!"

The "core" of the crystal radio had been switched out with something else.

It had likely been swapped out while she had been unconscious in the city library. By sending magical transmissions "through the crystal radio" someone could make others think Freadia had sent them. That might allow someone to slip past the Anglican interception network.

She pulled out the unneeded part and brought it close to inspect it.

(This stone shouldn't have too great an output. Its range is less than a hundred meters. That means whoever wanted to use the crystal radio remotely is inside Sword Sanctuary!!)

♦

Itsuwa felt a dull pain explode in her temple.

(It cut off!?)

She had to tell Tatemiya and the others within London about Arlands Darkstreet, the boss of the magic cabal named Dusk Waiting to Awaken. However, her communication spell relayed through the crystal radio had failed.

The other Amakusas would only have felt the same dull pain.

(It wouldn't be cut off for no reason. Now that our trick has been exposed, everyone in Sword Sanctuary will focus on me. And not long after that, magicians will arrive from outside the facility!)

Should she quickly leave the morgue now?

The underground facility had the chaotic layout of an ant colony. This was Itsuwa's first time here, so she would not be able to head straight for the closest exit while avoiding the enemies that knew the land.

On the other hand, it was obvious what would happen if she tried to hole up in the morgue. She was underground, so it was all over if they sealed up every exit. And it was also possible they would blow up the entire area.

She did not have time to spare.

If she did not make a decision soon, she would be cornered.

♦

The room Flack Anchors and the other criminals had been brought to was locked unnaturally, so Freadia Strikers broke down the door. Inside, she found the customization worker bound by power cables.

"Oh, honestly. What happened!? I don't see Flack!!"

"Bhah! I-it wasn't him in the first place. A girl came out of a wax doll!!"

"The Amakusas…"

She unbound the young man and the two of them searched the underground facility.

The customization worker must have contacted someone because the magicians guarding the perimeter of the Sword Sanctuary quickly rushed in.

"Check inside every locked door. If you don't have a key, break it down. How strong are the doors here?"

"Where do you think you are? If you need to break down a door, we have Hrungnir. That masterpiece will break down any barrier in a single blow."

♦

The action Itsuwa took in that instant was not quickly leaving the morgue or placing the chairs and table in front of the single door.

She returned the documents to their proper shelves and deleted the computer's search history. She was unsure if that was enough, so she also poured the table's water pitcher into the computer.

(That just leaves…)

If she was being honest, she had no definite means of victory.

After completing a few tasks, Itsuwa added on the handkerchief she pulled from her pocket.

And…

♦

Freadia Strikers had left her parents when she was still young.

There was simple reason for this: her parents had been imprisoned by the Anglican Church.

She had not grown to hate the Anglicans or Necessarius because of this. Her parents had done something which made imprisonment inevitable. She never doubted that fact, so she turned no hatred toward the organization that had strictly yet fairly judged them.

Freadia's father and mother had both been magicians.

And to make things more difficult, they had been so immersed in magic that it was the only way they could prove their usefulness yet they also hated magic from the bottom of their hearts.

Freadia now worked for Necessarius by killing the villainous magicians who could also be seen as moral, so she knew just how filthy, cold-hearted, and frightening magic could be. Anyone with a proper sensibility would want to run away immediately.

The problem had been in her parents' swift decision-making and ability to take action.

Also, they had been skilled enough that those around them would not let them simply leave the magic side.

So when her parents had tried to leave, a group had feared they would leak high-level techniques and had thrown them in prison.

Everyone had been in the right.

Her parents had been "properly" imprisoned because they had been "too right".

However…

Wasn't there something wrong with the initial starting point?

Magic was scary.

Magic was frightening.

Magic should be hated.

That side of magic certainly existed. The villainous magicians who received capital punishment left cruel traces of their presence that were hard to look at.

However, those "villainous magicians" were not the standard on the magic side.

They were irregular, they were defective, and they did not even make up 1% of the magic side.

Magic was meant to be hidden. It was not to appear on the surface of history and it was not to be seen by those who were not prepared. The large force known as the magic side was treated as an outcast, but was that truly the right thing to do? Those "villainous magicians" selfishly spread damage everywhere, but wasn't it unreasonable to therefore treat the magicians with wonderful and praiseworthy skills as something detestable?

That was why Freadia Strikers did everything she could to hunt down her enemies.

And she did so as a member of the organization that had driven her parents to destruction.

Neither the Anglican Church nor her parents had been wrong. They had both been right and they had both done what was right. And if that led to a hopeless result, that was unreasonable. In that case, someone had to correct the source of that unreasonableness.

Magic was something to be proud of.

Magic was wonderful.

Regaining that side of magic was Freadia and the others in Necessarius's job. Someday when its original shine had returned, she knew magic would no longer be treated as an outcast. They did not need a great war between magic and science over who controlled the world. Every individual person could make the judgment for themselves. Which set of skills was more wonderful, more convenient, easier to use, and more trustworthy? People would naturally lean in one direction over the other.

Evangelism had once been suppressed on the national level, but the spread of Christianity had not been stopped and it was now the largest religion in the world. This would be the same.

If that happened, she could be proud of where she worked.

And then no one would ever again need to suffer for doing the right thing.

So…

“I knew what I had to do from the beginning.”

She did not know what the Amakusa Christian Church was thinking.

She had not completely analyzed the situation surrounding them.

“But I will stop you regardless. This small violent rampage is exactly what is warping the entire world.”

♦

Freadia and the customization worker arrived at a certain door.

One of the magicians who usually guarded the perimeter spoke to them.

“We have checked everywhere else. This is the only place left.”

“Then let us begin,” said Freadia bluntly.

The customization worker set up a spiritual item resembling a stone club in front of the door. It was so massive that it was placed atop a sort of wooden cart.

“How much longer do you need?”

“I can begin at any time.”

The Amakusa girl was holed up in the room used to store records of past cases. Freadia did not know why she would have gone there. She may have been trying to erase some important information, but Sword Sanctuary was not the only place in which these records were kept. Erasing records here did not seem at all useful.

But Freadia would learn the girl’s reason once she was caught.

The room had only one entrance. They would break down the door no matter what. Once a dozen or so direct combat magicians stormed in, they would quickly take control of the room. The enemy had no chance to fight back.

“By the way, it seems a Necessarius nun named Orsola Aquinas was trying to contact you.”

“Ignore her. I already looked through the data on her. Involving someone else with connections to the Amakusas would accomplish nothing here,” spat out Freadia. “Now, please begin.”

“Sure thing,” was the carefree response.

Immediately afterwards, Freadia heard a tremendous rupturing sound. The stone club forcefully exploded as it was pressed against the door.

Hrungnir was a giant from Norse mythology who was counted as an enemy of Thor. He was killed in a single blow during a duel with Thor, but his weapon was smashed and a sharp fragment stabbed into Thor’s forehead.

This was an application of that.

This spiritual item purposefully “lost” so that it would apply definite damage to the “victor”. It did not matter how strong or hard the target was. This “final attack” could destroy almost any door because it itself was incredibly fragile.

This door was made of thick wood and was supposedly magically protected as well as physical locked, but it shattered along with the stone club. Fragments flowed into the room and Freadia and the others charged in a moment later. Their odds of success shot up if they attacked while the enemy was still dazed.

However…

The magicians who forcefully entered the room suddenly stopped.

The Amakusa girl lay on the floor.

Her body was covered in blood flowing from her back and she did not appear conscious.

“Did she have her back pressed against the door?” groaned the customization worker. “Did she want to hurt herself when we broke the door?”

It may have been a desperate attempt to kill herself. Necessarius had grown during the days of the witch hunts, so they had some of the greatest torture techniques in the world. This girl may have chosen death to avoid that.

That was Freadia's initial idea, but she soon changed her mind.

"Damn you, Amakusa girl… You knew you couldn't win in a direct fight, so you chose defeat to avoid a battle, didn't you!?"

"What's the point of that? This isn't a sports match. We can easily finish off an unconscious enemy."

"She made sure there was a point to it."

Freadia turned toward the center of the room.

The stolen original piece of Freadia's old crystal radio sat on top of the reading table. That crystal was a stone smaller than a human molar and it had the "negative legend" of spreading damage without end if it was not carefully managed.

The process to stabilize it was simple enough.

She only had to place the original part back in the radio.

However, the table was covered in some kind of Eastern writing and the crystal was stuck in the center. Freadia tried to pick it up, but she could not. She could not place it within the radio like this. There were ways of calming the "stone" on its own, but the Eastern spell drawn on the table could easily interfere.

In other words…

"She injured herself after making sure we had to carefully nurse her back to health. That was her plan! We can't finish her off. Not until we deal with this stone!!"

Part 6

"Uuh…"

Itsuwa awoke to find something odd about her clothes.

(Bandages?)

She did not appear to be in a hospital. The walls and ceiling were made of stone and she lay in an old-looking bed with belts to restrain her limbs. The room's light seemed to be flickering, so she assumed it was coming from candles or lamps.

“This played out just as you wanted it to, so I hope I don’t need to explain anything.”

A cold female voice stabbed into her ears.

Itsuwa turned her head and saw someone sitting in a chair near the bed.

“So these bandages…?”

“We need you alive, so we had no choice but to cover the wound. I am honored you made me go out of the way to explain our humiliation.”

Itsuwa let out a slow breath and transformed her life force into magic power.

She sensed no interference preventing her from using magic. Setting up a trap would be easy enough, but they did not want her to die until she did what they wanted.

Of course, that would change once she did do what they wanted.

She moved as much as she could while strapped to the bed and felt an odd stiffness in her back. Not only had they stopped the bleeding, but it seemed they had completely sealed the wound with new skin.

“Let us get down to business. How do we remove my stone from the table in the document morgue?”

“…”

Instead of answering, Itsuwa forced her head to turn so she could view more of the room. The two of them seemed to be the only ones there and Itsuwa saw no communication spiritual items. The girl’s crystal radio was worrisome, but it showed no sign of activity.

The girl in the chair frowned in displeasure over being ignored.

“Surely you know what kind of group Necessarius is. We have polished the skills we need to gain information. If you want to retain any dignity in your life, I suggest you tell us what we want sooner rather than later.”

“It’s a Mandala,” replied Itsuwa slowly after checking around the room. “You could call it an Eastern diagram of the laws of the universe. What you saw on that table was not a spell to keep that small crystal on the table. Just as the Mandala is used to help one recall the existence of god, you were made to imagine the presence of the crystal radio component when you looked at that pattern. That is the truth.”

The girl stopped moving for a moment.

She was likely trying to decide if that was accurate or not.

Itsuwa gave a thin smile and continued.

“No matter how much you tried to grab it, it wouldn’t budge, would it? Of course it wouldn’t. The object wasn’t even there. No one can grab an illusion.”

“Do you have any objective evidence of this?”

“Check my right pants pocket.”

The girl stood up and inserted her slender hand into Itsuwa’s pocket while Itsuwa lay bound to the bed. Itsuwa felt a tickling sensation on her thigh.

The girl looked confused when she felt something hard and grimaced once she pulled her hand from the pocket.

She held an exceedingly primitive electronic component. And it was perfectly stabilized.

“I understand the trick.” The girl clicked her tongue as she held the stone between her thumb and forefinger. “But I hope you understand your usefulness is at its end now. I have no more reason to protect your life. And to be honest, I really feel like killing you right now.”

“Even though the person truly behind this incident is brazenly walking around outside at this very moment?”

“Are you talking about your fellow Amakusas?”

“If you truly think that, I may have chosen the wrong person to negotiate with,” decisively declared Itsuwa. “If you assume the Amakusas stole the free pass from the Anglican Church, how do you explain me sneaking into Sword Sanctuary? Was I destroying records on past incidents? If you check that morgue, you’ll find the records on the Amakusa members are still there. And it isn’t like Sword Sanctuary is the only place those records are kept. Burning the files here would be meaningless.”

“Then are you saying you came here to investigate something?” The girl sat back down and crossed her legs. “That does not prove someone else was behind all this. You may be searching for the address of an Anglican VIP. You may be planning to use that and the free pass to pull off an assassination. I do not think you have any room to argue.”

“…”

“I am aware a magician going by the name Flack Anchors was the one to attack the city library, but that does not mean the Amakusas are completely innocent. You might have been working along with him. And let’s not forget that *we still do not know where the real Flack is*.”

That comment hurt.

It was true that a lot had happened while the girl was unconscious, but she would never accept it if Itsuwa said as much.

There was a difference between the simple truth and what someone would accept.

Itsuwa changed her train of thought and opened her mouth.

“Then tell me this: what was that Flack person trying to do in the city library?”

“What?”

“If you have any sense at all, you should have realized no grimoires were stolen. Does that mean the person behind the attack succeeded or failed? If everything went according to plan, was the true objective having me sent here to Sword Sanctuary? But why? As you said, I could have been looking up a VIP’s address to assassinate them. But then why would our plan go from the free pass, to the city library, and then to Sword Sanctuary? There would have to be a shorter route to reaching that information.”

“Hm…”

Plus, if they were after information, they only needed to complete the entrance exam normally.

Once they were official members of Necessarius, they could safely take the information they wanted and pass it on to the others on the outside.

However, they had not done that.

And there had to be a reason for it.

If the Anglicans could not provide a satisfactory reason for that, their suspicion would lose legitimacy.

“The Anglican Church is one of the world’s leading organizations when it comes to resolving this kind of incident. Nevertheless, they have beaten you at every turn and we reached them first. My guess is they spent a long time thoroughly simulating this with the Anglican Church as their assumed enemy. In other words, they know what you will do. On the other hand, we can betray their expectations despite being a much smaller group. If you truly want to resolve this, you should add us into your investigation. If you don’t, you will only continue to lose to them.”

“I see,” muttered the girl in the chair. “But there is still a risk of you running away the instant I free you and let you outside.”

“You can attach as many spiritual items as you see fit. As long as I can clear the suspicion against me, I will have no more reason to escape. Handcuffs and a collar will not be a problem.”

The girl snapped her fingers and the belts restraining Itsuwa’s limbs released on their own.

“Please remove your clothes,” said the girl.

Itsuwa was completely taken aback by this bold statement.

The serious atmosphere was blown away.

“…What?”

Thinking she had misheard…no, hoping she had misheard, Itsuwa asked the magician to repeat herself.

However, the girl stared Itsuwa directly in the eye and repeated the exact same words.

“Please remove your clothes.”

Those words felt like a physical blow and Itsuwa almost toppled backwards like a dead cicada. However, she could not allow that. She suddenly realized she was in a bed, and one with suspicious looking restraints at that.

But the Anglican girl did not hesitate.

Itsuwa was balancing on her waist while trying desperately to sit back up before she fell backwards, but the girl grabbed her shoulders and pushed down with her body weight.

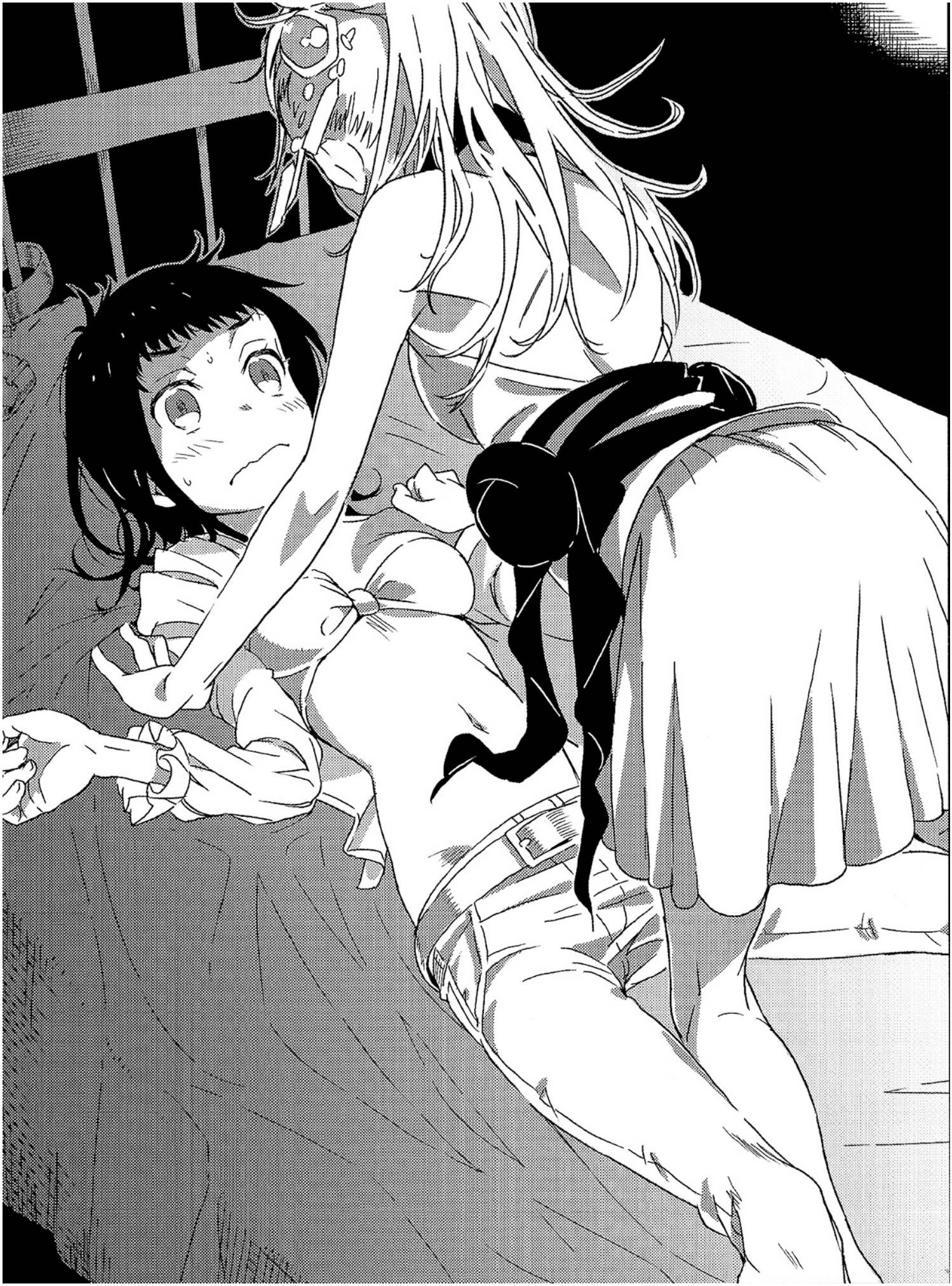
“No, wait… What are you doing!?”

“The risk of the stone going out of control and hurting us is gone. You had created a situation where we needed information only you knew, but we no longer need to keep you alive. Yes, that’s right. Now that it does not matter if you die, I can easily restrict your actions with a collar-like curse.”

“Why are you calmly explaining this while removing my shirt!? And I really don’t like hearing the word ‘collar’ right now!!”

“What has you so worked up? Oh, are you the type whose heart rate is affected by other girls as well?”

“It’s more unnatural to not be bothered when someone starts taking off your clothes! Wait, wait! I can take off the shirt myself, so turn around!!”



And so, the female Anglican magician applied a collar-like curse to Itsuwa's back so she would not escape.

Her specialty seemed to be curses using jewels, but Itsuwa felt something faintly itchy run across her back.

"We need to hurry, but I can't exactly bring you out in front of everyone when you have already been deemed a problem. Sneak along after me."

"Please give me my shirt back first!!"

The girl said her name was Freadia Strikers.

After somehow retrieving her shirt, Itsuwa followed Freadia to the surface.

On the way, Itsuwa explained what information she had.

"This involves the Necronomicon, bringing the underwater city of R'lyeh to the surface, the magic cabal Dusk Waiting to Awaken, and its boss Arlands Darkstreet."

"An Anglican base was built on the Pacific where the incident three years ago occurred, so that area of the sea has been sealed off. They cannot use that location, but I doubt they would steal the Necronomicon if that was enough to end this. They must be constructing some other method of performing the ceremony."

Upon reaching the surface, they left Sword Sanctuary's grounds and found a small vehicle parked on the side of the road.

"At any rate, we need to check on what Arlands and the Dusk Waiting to Awaken are up to. Especially anything related to the ocean. They might be using a dummy corporation to build an oil platform or something."

As Itsuwa explained, Freadia tossed her a small key.

She caught it and realized it was a car key.

"Are you sure I should do the driving?" asked Itsuwa with a frown.

"I don't want to hold the steering wheel while also keeping the crystal radio targeted."

Itsuwa headed for the vehicle's driver's seat and began to stick the key in the keyhole.

However, it did not fit.

She tried a few more times, but it would not work.

“Wait…”

Itsuwa looked up, but she had lost sight of Freadia who had supposedly circled around to the passenger side.

Itsuwa slowly looked around with a very bad feeling of what was to come.

She found Freadia standing behind her and holding the dial of the crystal radio. In this situation, Itsuwa had no way of fighting back. Freadia would be able to use the crystal’s curse before Itsuwa could do anything. In addition, Itsuwa had a curse on her back which prevented her from fleeing.

“It is true that you are a problem,” said Freadia quietly. “In this situation, your presence is much too dangerous. Flack may have been the one behind this and the odds are good Arlands and the Dusk Waiting to Awaken are secretly involved. …However, that does not mean you are cleared of all suspicion. You stand in a dangerous position where you could easily prove treacherous. Even if I had not agreed to your deal, you would have spoken with some other magician and secretly escaped.”

“Killing me in Sword Sanctuary where I was defenseless would have caused several problems, so you made it look like I tried to escape first. Is that it?”

Itsuwa gave up on trying to open the door and put her hands up with the key still held between the fingers of her right hand.

She was approximately five steps from Freadia.

She did not have her spear. The Amakusas searched out and used the magical symbols in everyday objects, but Freadia would not give her a chance to do so here.

(I won’t be able to move more than two steps.)

As Itsuwa thought, Freadia spoke quietly.

“Did you think I would play the role of the stupid policeman forever?”

“So you’re the type who will break the rules if necessary…” Itsuwa let out a slow sigh. “But, Miss Freadia, were you really the one to create this situation?”

“What?”

“As long as you set it up beforehand, all you need is a single sign. My communication spell that used your crystal radio was cut off in an instant, but they still would have felt a staticky headache. *And that was all I needed.*”

As soon as she finished speaking, Itsuwa took a large step forward.

(Was that a bluff!?)

That was Freadia's initial thought, so she began to turn the crystal radio's dial.

But then Itsuwa suddenly disappeared. Freadia lost sight of her target in the darkness as if the girl had teleported away.

"So that's it! A manhole!!"

She frantically moved closer and found an opened manhole where Itsuwa had vanished. A team of her comrades had likely been waiting after traveling here through the sewers. Freadia peered inside, but saw only deep darkness. She could see no one there.

"Dammit!!"

She frantically twisted the crystal radio's dial. Her weapon was a formless curse. Unlike a handgun, she could still attack from a certain distance even if she had lost sight of her target. Plus, Itsuwa had the other curse applied to her back, so she would always receive Freadia's attack as if from point blank range.

However…

"…"

Freadia had a bad feeling about the situation and stopped just short of attacking.

She broke the window of the stranger's car that was parked on the side of the road and pulled a flare from below the driver's seat. She activated it and dropped the spark-spewing cylinder into the open manhole.

Something grew visible in the darkness.

The same symbol she had seen on the table in Sword Sanctuary's morgue was written larger and more complexly.

However…

(They swapped out the contents of my crystal radio while I was unconscious in the city library. They might have analyzed the details of how the radio works in that time. If they did, they could have built up a spell to turn the curse back at me.)

Part 7

Splashing noises could be heard in the darkness.

Itsuwa had met back up with Tatemiya, Tsushima and the others, so the Amakusas were now running through the sewer.

“Ew. It really stinks in here.”

“Don’t be picky. This mostly collects rainwater.”

“Either way, I really want a shower right about now.”

As Itsuwa listened to Tsushima, she looked over her shoulder again and again.

She knew worrying about it now would not help, but she could not help herself.

“Did that really work?”

“She isn’t attacking us. I’d say that proves we successfully tricked her.”

Tatemiya and the others had set up various tricks while Freadia was unconscious in the city library, but their time had been limited. They knew she used the crystal radio for her magic, but they had not been able to fully analyze its structure.

That was why they had tricked her.

It was the same as the Mandala that Itsuwa had drawn on the table.

It was the same as making her imagine a nonexistent radio component was there.

However, this Mandala had brought a different thought to Freadia’s mind when she saw it.

“*That Mandala should have made her think we had already analyzed her crystal radio spell*, so she won’t try attacking us even though we don’t have any way of fighting back.”

That kind of trickery would not work forever.

Before Freadia could calm down and send a decisive attack, Tsushima stabbed several long, narrow needles into Itsuwa’s back. The curse on her back was quickly destroyed and disappeared.

“Now then, let’s get to the real issue at hand.”

Their enemy was Arlands Darkstreet and his magic cabal named Dusk Waiting to Awaken.

Their goal was to stop that cabal from bringing the underwater city of R'lyeh to the surface and providing its boss with intense inspiration. Itsuwa and the other Amakusas ran beneath the streets of London in order to stop that large-scale ceremony which would drive everyone nearby insane.

CHAPTER 4

Part 1

When one thought of the London waterside, one thought of the Thames which meandered through the city. That river was more than a tourist attraction. It functioned as one of the world's largest commercial waterways and all sorts of ships cruised up and down it day and night. As a river running through a capital city, it had a lot of drainage ditches leading to it and an odd splashing sound could be heard from one such open hole.

Itsuwa and the others from the Amakusa Christian Church exited from it.

"Ahh, I just want to jump into the bed at a cheap hotel and stop thinking."

"Stop making wishes you know can't come true. You aren't a child."

As she listened to Tatemiya and Tsushima's conversation, Itsuwa climbed up onto the concrete bank of the river. The river had water level cameras, but they would not activate unless the weather worsened. Every advanced country was being forced to minimize their public utilities.

"Itsuwa, is the wound on your back okay?" asked Tsushima as she stuck her head out from the drainage ditch.

"Yes. The Anglicans seem to be good at healing at least. It's completely recovered."

"Even if you were trying to safely escape a completely surrounded room, pressing up against the door to be hit by the spell destroying the door is completely insane."

"Yes, but clearing our names by picking a fight with the Anglican Church and pursuing a magic cabal is crazy enough as it is."

The quality of the river's water was decent, but the humidity still made it unpleasant.

"What do we do now?" asked Itsuwa as she reached down from the bank to help the other members up. "We know the magic cabal Dusk Waiting to Awaken and its boss Arlands Darkstreet are behind this, but we don't know what exactly they are going to do or where. If we don't do something, we can't stop them, but it would be hard to sneak into another Anglican facility."

“It isn’t as if we can’t do anything.” Tatemiya practically collapsed on top of the bank. “This is a large scale ceremony to bring the underwater city R’lyeh to the surface. Preparing for that would require fine-tuning the magical symbols on the stage for a long period of time. Do you think they would use a wide range and high output barrier to cut off a small magical world they hope will fool the Anglicans? Doing that would just make them easier to find.”

People had either wanted to avoid paying for parking or had come to fish at night because a line of cars was parked on the side of the road by the bank.

“You mean they’ll have registered as some official project as a disguise?” asked Tsushima as she used both hands to push Ushibuka’s large body up from below.

“I don’t know if you would call it a dummy company or what, but that would be easiest. After all, the Anglican Church’s specialty doesn’t extend beyond the magic side.”

And even if Academy City and the rest of the science side had noticed this dummy company, they would have no way of determining how much of a magical threat they were.

This of course violated the treaty between magic and science, but they had skillfully managed to hide in the gap between the two sides.

“But how do we find them?” asked Itsuwa again. “The Anglicans aren’t stupid, so they won’t let us use the same method twice. We should assume we won’t have another chance to access their database.”

“That’s easy. If they’re using an official name as a disguise, they can’t conceal themselves completely. They’ve chosen to raise their defenses by mixing in with tons of harmless data, but they haven’t actually hidden. In fact, they can’t hide. We should be able to search for them on the normal internet.”

Tsushima climbed up onto the bank on her own, exchanged a glance with Itsuwa, and frowned.

“Don’t tell me you plan to search using our cell phones. The Anglicans would find us right away.”

“Does Europe have internet cafés? Then again, could we really get to one with all the cameras in the shopping districts? We just walked through the sewers, so I think we would gather attention.”

“That’s easy too,” readily answered Tatemiya. “Internet access is not exclusive to computers and cell phones. These days, even hot water dispensers and air conditioners can access the internet. With smart houses, the entire house has access, and with electric cars, the entire car does. That can cause some problems, but the point is that a lot of everyday objects are part of the internet even if they aren’t specialized communication devices. For example…”

Tatemiya took three steps forward and arrived at one of the cars parked along the road.

He did not hesitate to break the driver's side window with his elbow.

"Car navigation systems."

It of course depended on the model and the owner's level of caution, but car navigation systems tended not to be password protected because they were kept within a locked car. Some models depended on pre-existing internet environments and browser systems because they wanted cheap yet high-quality functionality without building the information management infrastructure from scratch. Those models could be used to search the internet like normal.

Tatemiya reached though the broken window and unlocked the door. He then removed the multi-function car navigation device from its fixture and pulled it out. That device could be used to watch television, play simple games, and browse the internet.

He typed on the keyboard displayed at the top of the screen and spoke.

"Currently, there are 430 ocean projects under British jurisdiction, both government and civilian. Their locations are spread out across all seven seas."

"That's more than I expected."

"The colonial days are long over, but an economic federation still exists centered on England and the pound."

Officially, England was an economically prosperous industrial nation, but it was as lacking in resources as any island nation. When a change to the situation could lead to a sudden lack of resources, it was not a bad idea to regulate one's environment so one could prioritize making deals to acquire those resources. And by focusing on facilities that could also be used for military intelligence such as radars, they could indirectly cover a wide area of the world.

On the magical side, the facilities could be used to interfere with the ley lines and other veins of magical energy throughout the world, to gather and use historical materials, and as relay points to send magicians around the world.

Itsuwa glanced at the search results on the car navigation system screen.

"Oil platforms, researching new deep sea species to acquire patents on new drugs, and rental of data on submarine volcanoes and earthquake prediction."

“There’s a lot here, but we can’t narrow it down like this,” muttered Tatemiya. “According to Itsuwa, Arlands of Dusk Waiting to Awaken failed once on the Pacific three years ago. How long do you think it would take him to begin his next project?”

“It depends on the scope of the failure, but doesn’t it seem like he gave up on the Pacific method? If he could have recovered in a few days, there would be records of a second or third try before the Anglicans got involved. Even being generous, the project was probably on hold for over half a year.”

“In other words, we should focus on ocean projects that began at about that time or had a new top investor at about that time.” Tatemiya made some adjustments and the search results reduced by over half. “Also, the Pacific method had 103 victims. He’s trying again with an upgraded version, so the general structure shouldn’t be too different. I’ll narrow it down to projects of about that size.”

“R-really? I doubt the entire crew and all the workers aboard that resource extraction ship knew about magic.”

“Of course they didn’t. But if they could raise R’lyeh on a small boat of five to ten people, they wouldn’t have chosen such a huge ship as their base. The magicians would want it as small as possible, but they would need a facility above a certain size to draw the magic circles and create the temple.”

A project run by five to ten people could not prepare a large scale facility like that. That would be like constructing a high-rise apartment building when a tent would have sufficed. It would look suspicious. To prepare such a large facility, they had needed to call in large numbers of otherwise unneeded people.

This halved the results again.

“Itsuwa, did you look through Arlands Darkstreet’s profile?” asked Tatemiya as he stared at the screen.

“It was in with the records on the past incident, but I only had time to skim through it.”

“I just need to know one thing: *is he the type of magician who is rather particular concerning his name?*”

Itsuwa thought for a moment and nodded.

“Yes. It said he hated when others used his name lightly yet also tended to leave behind a sign only he understood.”

“Then this must have been a last resort…”

Tatemiya smiled bitterly and chose one of the short texts lined up in the search results.

He was taken to the webpage of one of the oldest and most well-known ocean development companies in England. However, it had sought external financial support during a slump in business two years before and the top levels of the company had been completely replaced.

A few names of those in management were given and Tatemiya pointed at one of them.

“It’s been broken down by a simple numerical cipher, but Arlands’s name shows up if you rearrange it.”

“Ah…”

The webpage introduced a few different projects, but the Amakusas focused on the largest and most expensive project which had begun after the company’s reorganization two years prior.

“Sunken ship salvage work in the Strait of Dover. It’s a joint project between England and France.”

That area of ocean was surrounded by wealthy nations and had several eras of instability in its history. The rich had often loaded up their many assets and tried to leave their country, but there had of course been others who targeted their ships.

This project seemed to involve salvaging the merchant ships which had been constantly sunk in the 1600s and 1700s. According to the website, a few wrecks had been pulled up by crane and the secret savings of nobles from hundreds of years ago had helped the finances of both England and France.

“I-if R’lyeh is successfully surfaced, it makes everyone within a thousand kilometers go insane, right!? If they do that there…!!”

“The Strait of Dover is only about 38 kilometers across. If they activate that huge effect, there will be victims on a large scale from England to France. And it might go beyond that.”

“England and France could start a magical war while trying to blame each other.”

The magic cabal and its leader were British, but the salvage project was a joint venture between nations. England would want to escape the blame France placed on them, so they might very well claim the cabal was made up of spies sent by France. That would begin a heated and fruitless argument that could eventually lead to military action.

Of course, it was entirely possible Arlands and the cabal intended to use that confusion for their own purposes.

“The Strait of Dover,” said Tatemiya as he tossed the car navigation system back into the parked car. “Our only option is attacking the ocean terminal for the salvage work and stopping R’lyeh from surfacing.”

“B-but I thought the Cthulhu mythos says R’lyeh is sunk at a certain point in the Pacific. Can they really perform the experiment in another ocean just because the Anglicans have sealed off the original point?”

“You said the previous incident happened in August three years ago, right?” smoothly answered Tatemiya. “The key to surfacing R’lyeh is said to be the stars and volcanic activity, but there is no evidence of those conditions applying in that place at that time. I don’t know if they used a planetarium or TNT on the ocean floor, but they must have developed a way of emulating the conditions.”

When the experiment on the Pacific failed, they had to have lost a lot of people and money, so the cabal would not have had anything to spare while desperately working to get back on their feet. They would not have used so much money to take over that ocean development company without a good reason. When the organization was in tatters and could break apart at any moment, they would not have been able to put together something on such a large scale if it was only a decoy.

So…

“We need to assume that they have what they need to call in the underwater city of R’lyeh in the Strait of Dover now that they have the Necronomicon.”

Part 2

The wind blew fiercely and noisily.

A young man carrying a book under one arm slowly approached a heliport made from flat concrete. The area had originally been a small-scale airport made for the wealthy who used the many golf courses in the London area and it had gained a custom of the guards and surveillance workers completely looking the other way.

No one wanted their lives to change in an odd way because they witnessed a corporate executive or politician with his mistress.

(Even this country has its holes.)

Arlands Darkstreet quietly thought to himself.

He had entered the financial world to help his magic cabal recover and to acquire the ocean base he needed for the summoning, but he had glimpsed a world he would never have seen as someone devoted solely to the magic side. You could call them gaps, loopholes, blind spots, failures, or whatever else, but ideal theories had a way of gaining imperfections when humans were involved.

He slid open the rear door of a small helicopter and climbed aboard.

The pilot knew nothing of magic, but Arlands did not hesitate to involve amateurs.

“Sorry about calling you out so late.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t have a place at home either. To be honest, I prefer being out here. Is it the same for you?”

“Perhaps,” replied Arlands with a grin.

It was true he did not seek enjoyment in his personal life. However, he had grown so immersed in his “work” that he could no longer distinguish between the two.

At the very least, someone who was motivated by the smiles of their wife and kids was unlikely to put together a spell that would drive over two million people insane simply to draw “dramatic inspiration” from it.

“Take me to my company’s salvage terminal in the Strait of Dover. Because we’re flying at night, try to avoid populated areas.”

“Understood, but you pay based on the fuel expenditure. If we take a longer route to avoid cities, it will use more fuel. The cost also goes up for people with a lot of luggage or who are fat. At any rate, I don’t care as long as you don’t complain afterwards.”

“That’s fine. Does earning more money make a decent excuse to your family?”

“Unfortunately, I’m paid on a strict monthly salary. Any extra money goes to the company.”

The helicopter floated up from the ground with a gentle vibration.

“I want to make a call. That won’t cause us to crash will it?” asked Arlands as he pulled out his cell phone.

“Sir, are you from an age where people couldn’t believe hunks of metal could fly?”

Once he had permission, Arlands made his call.

While flying so quickly through the sky, the cell phone towers on the surface could not pick up his signal accurately. Instead, he connected to the large radio installed in the helicopter which relayed him to a landline via the airport performing flight control.

And using this unusual method lessened the risk of England noticing as they monitored cell phone calls. This was another trick he had learned from the wealthy members of the financial world who wanted to discreetly contact their mistresses.

Those people loved their black luxury cars and private jets.

“Dodge, Vase, Rotia. I have the diagram and I’m on my way there. I want to finish this quickly, so make as many of the preparations as you can.”

“Have the pursuers sniffed us out?”

“They’re acting oddly. I scattered a few different diversions throughout London, but they aren’t going after any of them. I can only think that they saw through the diversions or that they’re dealing with *an even bigger problem*. At any rate, the odds are good the situation will partially develop into a black box. Let your guard down, and a wolf will dash from the forest and rip out your throat.”

“What breed of wolf do you expect? British or Japanese?”

“Even that is an unknown. Do you get how little we know now?”

“Understood. But we can’t do anything without the Necronomicon, so we’ll wait for your return.”

“I know what pages to use, but I haven’t actually read through it. After all, reading it would put me out of commission sooner or later. Prepare a few sacrificial pawns. We’ll have them read it and begin construction of the temple.”

“I already have some candidates. In return, they ask that we save their critically ill family members.”

“That’s fine. Just don’t let them know the illness was our doing in the first place.”

With that said, Arlands ended the call.

The helicopter pilot seemed to be smiling.

“What was that about? Diagram? Temple? Are video games popular with businessmen of your age?”

“I know it’s immature, but I just can’t get myself to stop playing these games. The trick to this game is to ensure your victory in a preliminary strategy meeting.”

“Hm. Is it an online game? I don’t know much about that. If you’re going to fly a virtual helicopter, why not use that time to study, get a license, and make some money?”

That brought a thin smile to Arlands’s lips.

He continued the topic by speaking one of his absolute rules.

“*Games are fun because they are useless*.”

“I don’t understand that at all.”

As the pilot continued to chat, Arlands looked out the window.

They were not floating in the darkness. The shining nighttime scenery down blow seemed to tear apart the darkness.

(Yes. Let’s make this a game so exciting it will go down in history.)

Part 3

The magic cabal Dusk Waiting to Awaken and its boss Arlands Darkstreet were planning their large-scale ceremony in about the center of the Strait of Dover.

Stopping them required leaving London, but the city contained tens of thousands of security cameras and plenty of Anglican magicians monitoring the night. The main roads were of course off limits, but they would be found even if they used the smaller roads. If that happened, they would be surrounded in no time.

Itsuwa and the others avoided this with a simple method.

“Let’s jump into the river.”

“Honestly, it’s 10:30 at night in September. This isn’t the season for outdoor swimming.”

“You’re the one that said you wanted a shower. This is the perfect opportunity, so let’s go.”

After a casual argument, the Amakusas jumped from the bank and back into the Thames. After sinking down once, their heads breached the surface of that water which looked as black as ink.

The Anglican magicians must have been as skilled as they claimed to be because Itsuwa felt no pain in her back even in the water. Her wound really had been fully healed.

“We need a ship heading downstream.”

“Let’s go with that one. A cargo ship will be easy to sneak onto.”

Even with tens of thousands of cameras, they were primarily set up to monitor buildings and roads. The river did have water level cameras, but they did not activate unless the weather was bad. The Thames was a surveillance blind spot that cut across London.

The Amakusas let the current carry them as they slowly approached a one-hundred-meter cargo ship. Tatemiya pulled out a rope and Tsushima formed a large circle with her hands from where her fluffy blonde head poked out of the water a short distance away.

Her sign meant there were no guards on the ship.

Unlike in the open sea, there was little risk of reefs or pirates on the river, so the crew naturally became more lax. They would not notice if someone threw a rope around a railing and climbed onboard.

Itsuwa and the others climbed up one by one.

The deck was covered in orderly rows of metal containers which were piled high enough to rival a two story building. The Amakusas hid themselves in the narrow passageway-like spaces between containers.

“It should take about half an hour to leave the city of London.”

“Can we ride this ship all the way to the ocean?”

“I don’t know how Arlands is heading out into the Strait of Dover, but I doubt we can catch up to him at the leisurely speed of a sightseeing ship.”

London was the home city of the Anglican Church, so its security network was quite strict. However, they were not home free once they left London. Even after leaving the city, any flashy magic would get them detected right away.

“So we have to find a vehicle outside the city and drive straight to Dover?” asked Itsuwa as she brushed up her wet bangs with a hand.

“Wh-what do we do after that? Arlands and his cabal are performing the ceremony out in the ocean.”

“We can use magic there, so we can prepare transportation. We won’t be as cramped as in London.”

The Amakusas had a spell that transformed a wooden ship into a paper charm one could carry around.

They had not yet used that sort of advantage because of the Anglican Church’s specialty in magician countermeasures.

“But where are we going to find a vehicle? Once we leave the city, the risk of having our magic seen goes down, but the number of houses goes down too. This is an island nation, but its population density is completely different from Japan’s. In the empty spaces, there really is nothing.”

“Yeah, it has seemingly never-ending areas of gentle hills covered in sheep. Searching for a vehicle there won’t do us any good.”

“As long as we look in the right place, we should find something. Or…”

“?”

“If you two stood on the side of the road like that with your thumbs out, we might be able to hitchhike pretty easily.”

“…”

Itsuwa silently looked down.

Lightly dressed + soaking wet after jumping into the Thames = ?

“……”

“No!! Itsuwa, don’t try to topple the pile of containers with your spear!!”

Tatemiya frantically tried to stop her, but the large Ushibuka and the short Kouyagi hit him in the back of the head without holding back very much.

“(You idiot!! Itsuwa is something like the inheritor of Japan’s culture of shame, so you can’t just come out and tell her that! The correct answer is to grin and admire the view!!)”

“(If she never noticed, we could have avoided this conflict!! Why do you think Japan invented the steamy hot spring peeping culture!?)”

“Stop it,” said Tsushima truly disinterestedly as she wrung the moisture out of her miniskirt like a rag. “They’re pretending to be in a crisis here, but they really just want you to reward them. Beating them up will only make them happy.”

“Tsushima-san, you don’t seem embarrassed, so it doesn’t feel like I gain anything by seeing you like this,” added Kouyagi unnecessarily.

Tsushima threw the boy off the cargo ship.

The elderly Isahaya saved Kouyagi’s life by fishing him out with a rope.

“Anyway, about R’lyeh,” said Tsushima as if the violence fifteen seconds prior had never occurred.

That was the giant mansion in which the evil god slept. The extremely advanced structure was created from incomprehensible curves to which standard perspective and geometrical lines did not apply.

“Even if they can perfectly recreate the phenomena described in the Cthulhu mythos, they’ll be summoning something that could literally destroy mankind. Even if they acquire the intense inspiration they need to clear some problem with a new piece of magic, it won’t matter because the world will have come to an end. Are they really too stupid to see that?”

“Magicians are driven by a lot of different things.” Tatemiya leaned up against a metal container. “Some speak their magic name but ultimately do nothing but earn money. Some work to spread their network of connections as a shortcut to achieving their goal, but the interpersonal troubles end up tripping them up. Some refuse to see how simple their desire is, speak an unnecessarily exaggerated magic name, and lose sight of their original objective. There are a lot of different types, but you can predict what they will do as long as you know what lies at the core of their motivation. However…

“However?”

“That kind of prediction doesn’t work at all with the most dangerous magicians,” spat out Tatemiya.

When the Amakusa leader had disappeared, Tatemiya Saiji’s name had been the first suggested for substitute pontiff. The quantity and quality of battlefields he had experienced had to have been greater than the rest.

“Those magicians find meaning in the meaningless and find use for the useless. That kind of idiot might say all sorts of things about what they want to do, but they ultimately just want to have fun. They always seem somehow removed from reality. If your thoughts are grounded in reality, you’ll find yourself unable to follow their thought process at times.”

Part 4

The helicopter carrying Arlands Darkstreet arrived at the center of the Strait of Dover.

A perfectly rectangular island sat above the dark ocean.

No, it was technically not an island. However, it was not quite a ship either. It was a giant float four hundred meters long, seven hundred meters across, and constructed from dice-like blocks with a hollow center. It used the power of the air to allow the entire reinforced stainless steel "island" to float.

With the sunken ship salvage facility, the living spaces for the one hundred or so workers, and the storage space for spare materials and equipment, the float gave a jumbled impression. It even had a simple harbor-like area. The helicopter landed at a makeshift heliport on one corner of the rectangular float.

Arlands slid open the rear door, stepped out, and tossed the Necronomicon to a subordinate who was approaching while fighting against the wind of the side rotor.

"Dodge, repeat the pages we need."

"Pages 45, 90-120, 200, and 210-222."

"Good. You have the sacrificial pawns prepared, right? Every second counts. Have them read it right away," said Arlands before patting the man named Dodge on the back a few times.

Dodge left and Arlands called out to a woman lifting large wooden boxes with a forklift.

"How is the glass?"

"It just needs the final adjustments and those can begin as soon as the Necronomicon pages have been read. Once we finish the final measurements based on our calculations, we can begin drawing up R'lyeh."

"Where's Vase?"

"Already in position. You could call him back now, but…"

"No need. But tell him to assume the enemy will arrive before long. Once the ceremony begins, I can't move. I do not want to regret entrusting the 'perimeter' to him."

"No matter who arrives, they won't make it in time."

“Even so,” said Arlands as he walked away from the forklift.

The types of tools used by surveyors were lying around. It was not that the workers had returned to their lodgings without cleaning up. Their location had meaning.

“Euclid,” muttered Arlands as he walked past a tool resembling a camera on a tripod. “First, we need to overcome Euclidean geometry.”

Loud western music was playing in the worker’s living area. It was late, but loud music was not going to bother anyone in the middle of the ocean.

Interference from those amateurs would be a problem during the sensitive adjustments, but there was no need to kill them and create the kind of bloody scene one would expect of the Cthulhu mythos. All that was needed to stop them was an arbitrary company holiday and lots of alcohol.

Arlands walked by the prefabricated three-story building and opened a window which was fogged up with steam.

A flushed man called out to him.

“What’re you doing out here, president? Is there something really interesting in the ocean here?”

“It is nothing that amazing.”

“Sure, sure. There’s a rumor going around that we salvaged a U-boat. …Why don’t you come join us? You’re the one that supplied the drinks.”

“Hm.” Arlands stood still for a moment. “I turned my family down, saying I had an urgent job, and came to this remote location this late at night. I came to this place which is equipped with a shower, a bed, and refrigerated champagne. Isn’t it a little tasteless to ask why I am here?”

“Gya ha ha ha ha!! What, are you fucking the secretary!?”

Arlands gave a parting wave to the laughing workers and continued to his room.

People would want to follow someone who put on airs of sophistication and acted secretive. It was faster to give a common answer they would accept without question. The wisdom he had gained in the financial world was useful, but none of it was anything to be proud of.

He entered the smaller prefabricated building next to the main one.

He locked the door on the inside, closed the blinds, left the lights off, and walked to the refrigerator near the sofa. It was the kind seen in hospitals or hotels that was smaller than a washing machine.

He opened the door.

The pocket on the inside of the door was lined with bottles filled with a thick dark-red liquid.

“Human flesh and human blood. No matter how many times I see it, it disgusts me,” he muttered.

He pulled out one bottle and moved to the steel business desk. He placed the bottle on the desk and reached for the projector located there.

The dull darkness was filled with the sound of a plastic switch being flipped.

A complex symbol appeared on one wall.

“I’ll start with the north wall.”

The light on the phone began to flash just as it started to ring.

Arlands held the receiver between his shoulder and cheek and picked up the 1.5 liter bottle again. He gathered his strength, but the lid would not come off.

“Are you ready?” he said into the phone.

“We just finished. How about you?”

“Wait a moment.”

He gathered strength in all of his fingers, but the bottle would not open. It was as if the lid were sealed with concrete. He thought for a moment, but gave up. He removed one hand from the lid, held his index and middle fingers together, and lightly traced them across the mouth of the bottle.

The entire top of the bottle was silently sliced off and it fell to the floor.

The dark-red liquid inside filled the room with the smell of iron.

“Okay. Start with the north.”

“A: plus 3.33. C: minus 5. G and H: plus 0.4.”

As Arlands listened to the phone, he approached one of the walls. He stuck a finger in the bottle, scooped up some of the liquid, and slowly ran his finger across the lines of the giant pattern displayed by the projector. However, he gave additional movements that ignored the pattern at a few points. Those were based on the Necronomicon information his subordinate was giving him by phone.

Once the entire wall was covered in a bloody pattern, Arlands returned to the steel desk and picked up the projector. He placed it such that a different wall became the screen and had it display a new pattern.

“Next is west.”

“B: minus 0.91. F: plus 1.41…”

Part 5

Several wooden ships were lined up on the Dover coast. The Amakusas had expanded the ships they normally carried as paper charms.

“There is not just one way of bringing R’lyeh to the surface. There are a few different methods,” said Tatemiya as he checked on the number of ships. “In general, there’s the movement of the stars and other celestial bodies and there’s increased volcanic activity. So watch out for any major movements in the sea or the sky. That will mean their ceremony is progressing.”

“Make sure you don’t board the unmanned fire ships,” cut in Tsushima while marking the side of a ship with her rapier. “They’re decoys we’ll detonate when we charge in. It’s your own fault if you get on the wrong boat.”

The unmanned fire ships outnumbered the normal ones 9 to 1. The Amakusa fighting style brought about by small numbers could be seen in their strategy here.

Itsuwa climbed onto the deck of one ship.

“The Strait of Dover is about 38 kilometers across and Arlands’s float is supposed to be at about the center point.”

“It’ll be hidden from the British and French coast, so no one will see the commotion. You can decide for yourself whether to view that as an opportunity or fear drowning with no one to rescue you.”

The twenty or more ships lined up on the coast started out into the dark ocean as if sliding along ice. They began one by one, starting from either end. They quickly accelerated, but at a much greater speed than a ship being pushed by the wind in its sail. The front of the ships tilted up diagonally so less than half of them touched the water.

Itsuwa spoke to Tsushima while making sure she was not thrown from the ship whenever it crossed a ramp-like wave.

“How do you think they are going to bring R’lyeh to the surface?”

“I don’t know. For one thing, if all they needed was a base for their ceremony in the middle of the Strait of Dover, did they really need the giant salvage facility?”

The float owned by Dusk Waiting to Awaken quickly came into view.

It would have been hard to overlook it.

With only the pitch black sea and sky ahead of them, they could hardly miss the giant structure giving off bright artificial light. The Amakusas did not know how many of the workers knew of the structure’s true purpose, but Arlands was clearly not the type to care about civilian casualties. If the massive damages to both England and France were not enough to stop the magician, the one hundred or so workers would mean nothing to him.

Tsushima must have sensed something because her expression slowly grew stern.

“Be careful.”

“?”

“There’s no way they will let us land safely. They’re going to try something.”

It happened the very next moment.

The ocean suddenly split apart in front of them and a tremendous pillar of water burst straight up.

The pillar easily exceeded twenty meters. The ships sailing ahead of Itsuwa’s were thrown into the air by the force of the explosive pillar of water.

“Was that the Dusk Waiting to Awaken!?”

“Not good! To the side, Itsuwa!!”

Tsushima’s sharp voice was almost drowned out by more and more pillars of water stabbing up from the ocean surface. The ships travelling right next to them were caught in the blasts. The ships may have been wooden, but they still weighed several tons. Even so, they flew into the air like plastic bags in the wind.

And one flew directly toward Itsuwa and the others.

No one was aboard that ship, but they had no time to be relieved.

“That’s a fire ship!! It’ll explode if it hits us!!”

Itsuwa immediately held up her spear, but Tsushima took the opposite action.

She stabbed her rapier into their own ship’s deck and muttered something under her breath.

The ship rapidly decelerated.

Christianity had several traditions related to water and ships. The Son of God had instantly calmed a stormy sea. An honest man had been able to walk on a lake, but an evil man had drowned when trying to follow him.

Tsushima used those traditions to momentarily heighten the waves crashing into their ship.

Essentially, she used makeshift brakes.

The airborne fire ship did not quite reach its target and it sank into the ocean while only scraping the front of their ship. Their ship then continued forward while passing over the sunken fire ship.

That was when they noticed something.

“I figured out what those pillars of water reminded me of: torpedoes. Are they detonating explosives set up at the bottom of the ocean?”

“You mean…?”

Tatemiya had said there were a few different patterns for bringing R’lyeh to the surface and that the movement of the stars and submarine volcanic activity were the most likely.

If the magic cabal was using the vibrations of explosives to simulate submarine volcanic activity…

“Arlands isn’t paying any attention to us! He’s completely focused on R’lyeh. We need to stop him right away!!”

If they succeeded in bringing R’lyeh to the surface, everyone within a thousand kilometers would go insane. If Arlands completed the ceremony, the Amakusas would be wiped out automatically, so he was not bothering to send anyone to intercept them.

“!!”

“Bear with it, Itsuwa! We can’t do anything if we don’t make it to the float!!”

However, the explosions at the bottom of the ocean did not seem focused on the Amakusas. If they were random, the odds of a hit lowered.

The fire ships arrived at one end of the float while arranged in a V-shaped wedge. Every single facility in the simple harbor was wrapped in explosive flames. The cranes, piles of containers, and even some of the dice-shaped pieces of the float’s base were bent, smashed, and blasted into the ocean.

The manned ships soon arrived as a second wave.

The ships slammed forcefully into a warehouse-like building, but the Amakusas jumped onto the float before the ships fully decelerated.

“Search for Arlands,” ordered Tatemiya as he held a wavy sword known as a Flamberge in one hand. “I don’t know what’s going to happen, but R’lyeh still hasn’t surfaced. If we can stop them here-...!!”

He was cut off by a soft noise coming from their feet.

“...”

Itsuwa silently looked down around her shoes.

Something odd was spread out there.

The float was primarily made of reinforced stainless steel. It gained its buoyancy by trapping air inside, so it was constructed from dice-shaped blocks combined into a flat surface.

However, something resembling a pulsing blood vessel ran across that hard stainless steel surface.

Itsuwa’s foot had sunk in up to the ankle. The hard surface’s outline began to crumble like melting chocolate.

“What...?” she asked before searching for the answer herself. “Their ocean base took the form of a structure floating in the ocean... So that’s it. They weren’t trying to drag up some strange artifact from the ocean floor. They were arranging the terminal itself so it would be R’lyeh!!”

“!?”

Tsushima frantically looked around.

The current time was on the border between what one would call “night” and “late night”, but bright lights remained lit all over the floating structure. The area was as bright as day and the lights were not pointed in a single direction. The brilliant lights shined in every direction which caused a strange phenomenon.

“A place where perspective does not apply. A city made of curves that cannot be represented in Euclidean geometry. Dammit, is that it!?”

The phenomenon itself may have been quite commonplace.

For example, when headlights lit up a pedestrian crossing the road ahead and the headlights of an oncoming car lit him up as well, the pedestrian would seem to disappear within the light. That was a stereotypical pitfall mentioned in driver’s manuals.

However, it was not the phenomenon itself that mattered here.

They only had to create a strange landscape that could not be explained with normal perspective and geometry. That, combined with the explosives at the bottom of the ocean, would allow the float to pass as the underwater city in which the evil god slept. And whether it was a deception or not, Arlands Darkstreet would achieve his goal as long as the precision of the emulation passed a certain point. He would obtain his massive inspiration and great numbers of people in England and France would become vegetables.

But on the other hand…

“If we can return this ‘landscape’ to normal, we can stop Arlands’s plan! Focus your attacks on the work lights and the metal panels and glass that are probably being used to reflect or refract the light!!” shouted Itsuwa.

But at that point, something like a rotten arm stroked her back.

She frantically turned around and held her spear at the ready.

“!! *Don’t look!!*” shouted Tatemiya.

But it was already too late.

What entered her vision was not an arm. It was something much more disgusting. It had countless suckers and was covered in an unpleasant sticky liquid.

“A tentacle…?” she muttered.

A great number of the disgusting things burst from within the dice-shaped pieces of the float’s base and they filled Itsuwa’s vision without hesitation.

Part 6

It covered all four walls, the floor, and the ceiling.

With all six sides of the room filled with bloody symbols, Arlands Darkstreet sat in the center of the room. He sat directly on the floor in a pose resembling Eastern meditation.

The Cthulhu mythos had started with nothing and gathered its credibility from many different cultures and mysteries. The breadth of variation and freedom found in it was surprisingly great.

His eyebrows moved slightly.

“So you finally make your appearance,” he muttered.

The float created with modern science had to be made identical to the underwater city of R’lyeh, so he naturally had to call in something corresponding to the sleeping evil god who was the master of R’lyeh. For one thing, the massive inspiration that came with R’lyeh surfacing was created when the thoughts produced by that evil god came into contact with a human brain.

As this evil god was directly related to Arlands’s goal, he could not avoid dealing with it, but this was not a being he could welcome in unconditionally.

By definition, this was not a being humans could handle.

If he recreated the sleeping evil god with 100% accuracy just like R’lyeh, he would be destroyed too. There was no defeating or controlling this being.

Even thinking in those standard terms was wrong.

If one was not careful in how one summoned it, that evil god produced from a normal human’s imagination would be impossible to use in any way.

Arlands’s convenient idealized plan had been to summon the evil god such that he could receive as much of its thoughts as possible while giving it as small a physical form as possible.

“But I suppose it wouldn’t be an evil god if it didn’t exceed your expectations.”

The large-scale ceremony had already begun.

Even though Arlands had made an error in his control and the evil god had attacked the prefabricated building, he could not leave now.

But despite the situation, Arlands smiled.

He smiled.

“Isn’t that right, Cthulhu?”

Part 7

Itsuwa collapsed to the side like an old tree felled by a logger and Tatemiya and Tsushima frantically ran over to her.

They saw no “disgusting monster” like Itsuwa had.

They could only see the mysterious bright landscape created with the bright lights, metal panels, and glass.

“What do think happened!?”

“It’s more of a mental presence than a physical one. *For now at least*! But if the summoning continues and the float becomes more identical to R’lyeh, a giant shadow with physical form will be here!!”

They had no time to spare.

It was on a limited scale, but glimpses of the monster they least wanted to appear were showing up here and there. They did not know what level of purity was needed for a “successful manifestation”, but they doubted they still had two or three hours left.

“How do we call Itsuwa back!?”

“I doubt any normal method of shaking her will do any good. She’s being limitlessly sucked into an external nightmare. If we hang a fishing line into that muddy water, the line will break!”

“It may be difficult to pull her out, but that evil god has secured a line to send information in, right? In that case, we need to analyze the file format and pump in tons of information of the same format. If the nightmare is diluted with meaningless information, the pressure on Itsuwa’s mind should let up!!”

Tsushima pulled jangling silver accessories from her pocket. They were all cheap products one could find at street stalls in sightseeing areas, but an Amakusa member knew how to pick up on minute religious designs the item’s maker may not have noticed. Those religious designs could be combined to perform magic.

However…

"…"

A large shadow covered their bodies.

They looked up to see a giant mass standing up on the float lit by so many bright lights.

"Dammit…"

At this stage, the attack Itsuwa had succumbed to was purely psychological. If one did not needlessly focus on it, they would receive no damage.

However, that was easier said than done.

With nightmares, pain, disgust, despair, and displeasure, it was all over as soon as you perceived them. The more one wanted to let them pass, the more strongly one focused on them.

Part 8

Arlands Darkstreet sat on the floor in the center of a square room filled with bloody symbols. He let out a long, slow sigh.

The movements of his physical body may have been gentle, but the mental work he was performing was speeding up and growing more complex.

And as he performed that work, his personal thoughts became somehow separate.

He was strongly aware of the rules for winning a game.

If one wished to win a game, one had to thoroughly enjoy the game. This of course did not refer to simply living for ephemeral pleasures. To put it another way, one must not have anything at stake in the game.

To use poker as an example, one's strategy and number of wins changed depending on whether it was a pure game or if money was on the line. In Las Vegas, it was not uncommon for someone who could win easily while playing normally to start losing when money was involved.

The same held true for any competition.

The monster in a game could swallow up expert and amateur alike. Once it appeared on the game board, one could not flee no matter how much training and experience one had. In a stereotypical example of being caught in your own trap, the nonexistent monster someone had created would easily swallow them whole.

One must not focus on what one had to gain.

One even had to set aside the fact that their life or fate were on the line.

The greater the incident and the greater everyone stood to gain or lose, the more everyone on the game board would tremble before that "monster". But what if you were the one person not imprisoned by that monster? What if you were the one person who could move freely on the game board? That would give you the ultimate advantage. That advantage could overcome innate talent, gathered experience, great assets, or great skill.

And that was why games were so much fun when one had nothing to gain.

Only the person who could truly enjoy the game was qualified to stand at the top.

"…"

Arlands smiled thinly in that dark room.

The giant float created as a sunken ship salvage terminal was now viewed as identical to the underwater city of R'lyeh. The sleeping evil god would soon walk out from it. He did not know who had come to stop him, but they would not escape an encounter with that evil god. Afterwards, Arlands alone would obtain intense inspiration from the evil god and he would cut off the summoning ritual before it fully entered the outside world.

That was the plan.

But instead, *Arlands's body fell to the side.*

He collapsed from his sitting position and a dark red liquid spilled from his nose and mouth.

"How…?"

Arlands's lips writhed as he lay on the ground.

His head remained motionless, but his eyeballs rolled in his head to look around.

"How did you survive?"

Someone stood directly behind the spot in the center of the room where Arlands had been sitting a moment before.

It was Itsuwa holding a spear.

Part 9

In truth, what had happened was quite simple. That sleeping evil god was even known as a galactic horror, so the Amakusas had had no hope of defeating it in a straight fight. In fact, it may have been accurate to say its default settings were those of a monster anyone would lose equally to.

So how had they reversed that situation?

That question too was based on a faulty assumption.

It was not accurate to refer to it as a "situation".

"Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth, Shub-Niggurath, Ithaqua, Ubbo-Sathla, Nyarlathotep, Hastur, Tsathoggua, Vulthoom, and Cthulhu. All of the evil gods you specialize in are beings no human can handle. However, those monsters always have a certain point in common. Do you know what that is?"

"…"

The decisive break in the summoning ceremony caused a great burden to wash across Arlands's entire body, so he could not move. Even so, he actively moved his eyes.

Even at this point, he appeared to be enjoying the game without any thought to what he could gain or lose.

"So that's it… All of the evil gods gain their role and terror from the story they represent…"

"Describing it like this may be too broad, but one can view the stories of the Cthulhu mythos as describing the rampage of a certain evil god from the perspective of the humans involved on the sidelines. In other words they are a *catalog of evil gods*. No matter how systematically and logically you put together a ceremony to use those in reality, you cannot ignore the story aspect as long as you are using one of those evil gods."

"So you used that story aspect to your own advantage?"

No matter how frightening an evil god they were up against, it could no longer attack once the story came to an end. Even if that same evil god appeared during the next ceremony, it could do nothing until that next "story" began.

In other words…

“You forced in your own ending. The battle on this float was false. I don’t know if you used an illusion or what, but you *quickly supplied* a conclusion where the intruders were easily defeated and that conclusion drove the evil god away from this place.”

“We didn’t do anything that high-level.”

Itsuwa and the other Amakusas had used a Mandala to trick the Anglican magician Freadia Strikers’s perception. However, that only worked against people. It would not have worked against that sleeping evil god which may not have even had a physical form.

“You and your cabal intentionally twisted the ‘landscape’ of this float. You created an artificial structure which could not be described with normal perspective or Euclidian geometry. That allowed the float to be viewed as identical to the underwater city of R’lyeh. …We only had to use that to our advantage. We interfered with your means of ‘twisting the landscape’ and inputted information saying we had lost. That was enough to have the evil god leave. We already had proof that the evil god could be deceived. After all, it appeared in the first place because you deceived it with your emulation.”

“You messed with the glass?”

“If you mean the surveying equipment, then yes.”

Twisting the landscape sounded simple enough, but one large problem remained.

From whose perspective was the landscape being twisted? The very same location’s landscape could give different impressions depending on which direction it was viewed from. This was even more important when perspective and geometry were being falsely altered with bright lights.

Arlands, the magic cabal’s boss, was holed up in a room, so he could not have been viewing the landscape.

And the ceremony would not have been created with the assumption that the Amakusas would see it from the float.

Which meant…

“You used the surveying equipment set up around the float to view the twisted landscape and to form a type of magic circle that would combine the view of the float with R’lyeh, didn’t you? Once we calculated out what kinds of distortions affected reality, we just had to draw the needed symbol on a piece of paper and hold it in front of the surveying equipment’s lens. It wasn’t hard.”

“Heh,” quietly laughed Arlands from the floor.

Finding the answer was simple enough, but instantly pulling it off in that crucial moment would have taken incredible skill. After all, the Amakusas would have been swallowed up by the evil god the moment they set foot on the float, so they would have had to come up with a countermeasure on the spot. They could not have done it without constant studying.

"Analyzing Cthulhu using the tabletop method… I suppose that is another way of enjoying this…"

Arlands let out a slow breath and stopped moving.

(Did the burden finally reach his entire body?)

The risk had been high from the moment he tried to use something no human could handle. In terms of equivalent exchange, the magic user would have been used up and died, so he had to have set up an exchange rate of the sort used in financial deals where one amount of money could set in motion dozens or even hundreds of times that amount.

He had gotten by with that, but what would happen to him now that the Amakusas had interfered and caused his ceremony to fail? There was no way Arlands could withstand that great burden.

Itsuwa crouched down and tore his clothes in a set pattern. After adding in the symbols for the bare minimum of self-healing and life support, she pulled a plastic bookmark from her pocket. She used a few small scratches to transform it into a communication spiritual item.

"I'm done here," said Itsuwa while holding the bookmark to her ear like a phone. "There shouldn't be anything to worry about, but we should eliminate the remaining cabal members and destroy the R'lyeh symbolism just in-…"

She trailed off while staring at one wall.

All four walls, the floor, and the ceiling were completely covered in bloody symbols. It was highly reminiscent of the Cthulhu mythos and the sight had a way of putting pressure on one's mind, but Itsuwa walked toward one wall and traced her finger across a portion.

She frowned.

The feeling had been slightly off.

"Is this…?" she muttered as she pulled out the front-most piece of her spear.

She used the blade like a knife and cut off a large piece of the wallpaper.

And she gasped.

Beyond the wallpaper covered in strange bloody symbols was something else.

The wall there was covered in a completely different magic circle.

“It can’t be… But this… It can’t be!!”

She heard Tatemiya asking questions over the communication spiritual item, but she removed it from her ear and stared at it.

She did not doubt what she had heard her ally say.

She was focusing on the communication spiritual item itself.

(*They’re similar.*)

That was her honest opinion.

She turned from the small tool in her hand and toward the collection of writing filling the wall beyond the wallpaper.

(The magical symbols and their arrangement are completely different, but the will of the person behind it is almost the same. That means this was arranged for the exact same purpose. But that means…!!)

Itsuwa gulped.

She felt like she was lifting the gauze to look back at a gruesome festering wound. She suppressed the intense desire to look away and checked back over the structure of the magic circle filling the wall. Doing so felt like stabbing the finishing blow into her own heart.

And she arrived at a conclusion.

She knew what that magic circle had been set up to do.

Communication.

It was meant to communicate information.

The spell took detailed data on the large-scale spell being performed on the float and sent it to a distant location.

“You’re…kidding…”

If the data was being sent away, someone had to be on the other end receiving it.

This did not end with Arlands Darkstreet.

There was someone else.

“What is it, Itsuwa? You finished with Arlands, right? In that case…”

She ignored the voice coming from her communication spiritual item and looked around the entire room once more.

She tracked down the details of the communication spell mixed in.

(If it’s being transmitted from here, it must be part of the R’lyeh surfacing spell. Specifically, the portion about creating the false conclusion that R’lyeh had surfaced in the Strait of Dover rather than the Pacific.)

She gulped.

A bad feeling rose from her gut.

(The Cthulhu mythos wasn’t what mattered to them. They were researching the margin of error that allows a spell to function even when it leaves the proper formula!!)

This was not over.

The ultimate objective of the magic cabal was not bringing R’lyeh to the surface. Their boss, Arlands, had not been hiding in the safest place.

They had surfaced R’lyeh in the Strait of Dover even though it supposedly could only be surfaced in the Pacific Ocean.

This had great value beyond the Cthulhu mythos.

They wanted to freely interfere with existing legends and myths and rearrange them as they wished. They were researching what level of freedom they had. If they could use the data they received from the R’lyeh experiment, they could make a staff of healing into a staff of killing or mass produce sacred items of which only one was meant to exist.

They gained two things from this.

First, they could modify existing sacred items as they wished and construct brand new spells.

Second, they could modify existing sacred items such as thick barriers or large-scale cannons and prevent the secret weapons belonging to giant organizations from functioning.

They gained a lot both in the positive and negative sense.

“…”

Itsuwa's eyes raced across the bloody symbols filling the room and calculated out the destination of the communication spell complexly tied in with it.

"Tatemiya-san," she muttered. "How many usable ships do we have left? Can we leave right away!?"

"What? Arlands and his cabal were destroyed. Where do we have to go now?"

"*Stonehenge*," replied Itsuwa.

"What?"

That was England's most famous ruins and various theories were still discussed as to what the mysterious stones were used for.

"The experimental data gained in the R'lyeh ceremony was sent there. Arlands most likely had another unit waiting there!! He used himself as a sacrificial pawn to guide this other team to success. The real threat is in Stonehenge. They're starting something large enough for the R'lyeh surfacing ceremony to be *nothing but a decoy*!!"

Part 10

A long, sash-like piece of paper writhed in the back seat of a midsized station wagon. The paper was not made of pulp or papyrus. It was most similar to sheepskin, but even that was wrong.

Human skin had been tanned, prepared, and sewn together.

That was the famous symbol of the books and documents in the Cthulhu mythos.

Vase, the person Arlands and the others had left the "perimeter" to, read through the text carved into that human skin.

"It looks like the transmission finished safely. The data is complete and it seems Master Arlands managed to thoroughly enjoy the game to the very end."

The driver's side window opened and a young man blew cigarette smoke outside.

"Does that mean what I think it does?" he muttered disappointedly.

"Whether the surfacing of R'lyeh succeeded or failed partway through, his fate would have been the same. Master Arlands was aware of this when he began the summoning ceremony."

Normally, Arlands Darkstreet would not have been the type to die at a time like this.

However, he had been the only magician in the cabal skilled enough to pull off the ceremony. This was not due to Arlands being incompetent. Vase absolutely believed it was his overabundance of skill that had shortened his lifespan.

“When can we begin?’ asked the young man in the driver’s seat.

“Right away.”

Vase had memorized the information he needed, so he tossed aside the report made of sewn human skin. The young man in the driver’s seat pressed his cigarette into the car’s ash tray.

The two of them exited the car at the same moment.

More than ten off-road vehicles were parked in the area and magicians of the Dusk Waiting to Awaken stepped out of them.

No sign was necessary.

Before them was a gently sloping hill covered in green grass. Vase and the other walked up that hill to the famous ruins made up of giant stones arranged in a circle.

This was Stonehenge.

Vase spoke to the other magicians who stood in the darkness.

“We will now begin the final phase. We are constructing the spell named Blank Paper. Let us provide a new interpretation and create a new era.”

CHAPTER 5

Part 1

"It is now midnight, so it is time for the quarter news. Today's first headline concerns the summit for the pound-focused economies. Traffic restrictions are to be put in place, so the cars making detours may cause congestion in-..."

Boring news played on a four-wheel drive car's navigation system, but it did not help keep the driver awake.

The car was parked on the side of the road near Stonehenge. It had not stalled and the battery had not died. This was part of Kate Wolks's job.

Stonehenge was a world heritage site, but it was still not known what exactly it had been built for. Was it a grave for an ancient powerful person? Was it a site to make sacrifices? Or was it meant to read the courses of the sun or stars? There were several plausible theories, but none of them were certain.

Kate seriously felt that acted as a curse.

It was an important sightseeing location for Salisbury and it had essentially been giving Kate food to eat since she was young, but it was not entirely known who exactly was managing and maintaining the relic.

Or perhaps it was more accurate to say there were too many people involved to see anything clearly.

Kate Wolks did not belong to a security company, an archeological research institution, or some strange ancient religion. She worked for the Highways Agency. So why was she helping maintain Stonehenge by keeping watch for local kids trying to spray paint it in the night?

Because of the road running by the relic.

Originally, someone had claimed all the vehicle exhaust would damage the giant stones. Also, the planners of a road widening had wanted to build right up to the edge of the relic and were still desperate to do so.

The Highways Agency had received too many complaints for the phone company to handle which had affected their normal duties, so they had created a division specifically for handling Stonehenge and shoved all the trouble there. But then the people complained that their taxes were paying people who only had to read Mary Hotter while listen to uninteresting complaints all day long.

Because they were known as the Stonehenge division, they were ordered to carry out unnecessary jobs related to Stonehenge.

And as a result, Kate Wolks had a shotgun sitting in the passenger seat while she killed time by watching boring news on the car navigation system's screen and tossing popcorn into her mouth. This system made her seriously want to ask god if her life was anything but a waste.

"Hm?"

Suddenly, she saw something dark cut across just in front of the car's bumper.

For an instant, she reached for the shotgun in the passenger seat.

"No, it's probably just a wolf."

Meeting one outside would be frightening, but it was not an issue while in the car. More importantly, she was on the lookout for people. She had no reason to leave the car unless she spotted mischievous children planning to make graffiti, thieves, or people who refused to accept any religion aside from the one symbolized by the cross.

She pulled back her hand, grabbed more popcorn instead of the shotgun, and turned back to the boring news on the screen.

She began seriously thinking about requesting one of the cable TVs official vehicles had.

♦

While leaning against the four-wheel drive car's door, Vase, a magician of the Dusk Waiting to Awaken, slowly removed his fingertips from the window.

He had attached a single piece of paper to the door. The paper had been torn several times and twisted such that seven sharp stakes appeared to be sticking out of it. They resembled spider legs or strange fangs.

There was a jewel known as a trapezohedron.

That jewel was the medium used to summon an evil god named Nyarlathotep and it was normally contained within a special box while supported by seven pins. The jewel's power was not invoked when the seal was broken. Instead, it called forth the evil god when the lid was closed and the jewel was covered in darkness.

Vase had made the car itself a symbol for the trapezohedron's box. Even if the "box" itself was fragile, it still had the seal needed to switch between summoning the evil god or not. Once that seal was made, the inside and outside were fundamentally cut off from each other.

Simply put, it was magic that prevented the person inside from ever wanting to leave the car no matter what happened outside.

"That's enough for here. Let's move on."

A great number of magicians obeyed Vase and left the car. The remote area around Stonehenge seemed to be wrapped evenly in darkness, but a careful examination showed some vague inconsistencies here and there.

"A university geology research group, an environmental protection group, city workers, and a vigilante group primarily made up of souvenir shop owners," said one of Vase's men. "Only counting the obvious ones, there are more than twenty cars and tents."

"And there are of course real magicians mixed in."

Stonehenge was a representative relic. The Anglican Church still used it for a few different ceremonies, but not even they knew why it had originally been constructed. They had allowed people to form their own opinions and thus gathered some ideas that even experts might overlook.

For that reason, the area around Stonehenge was filled with many different people.

Their affiliations and levels of seriousness were all over the place and they all monitored each other. This situation had been intentionally created so it was hard to tell where the real magicians were mixed in and so an attempt to eliminate one group would alert another group to one's presence.

"Is that all?" asked Vase.

Various different methods were used around Stonehenge because its actual reason for existing was not known. That created an opening that Vase and his group could take advantage of.

There may have originally been a single proper way to use it, but no one cared about that. Different theories were lined up next to each other like the different functions of a Swiss Army knife and one chose the most convenient interpretation. After this went on long enough, it was not hard to use a hundred distinct types of magic with that single symbol. It was like a piece of trick art that showed a different image from every angle.

The Anglican Church seemed to be using that to its fullest, but there was no guarantee they had found every last interpretation of the trick art.

If the interpretation changed depending on who was looking at it, its possibilities were endless. Vase and the rest of the Dusk Waiting to Awaken could find a use the Anglicans had not expected. And because the Anglicans had not expected it, they could slip past the eyes of the Anglicans guarding it like a brand new computer virus.

First, they had to show some results here.

Once they succeeded at the relatively easy Stonehenge, they would use that data to perform experiments at more difficult relics and holy sites. Repeating that process would push their level of completion and their success rate as close to 100% as possible.

“Once we seal off the witnesses, we can crush the Anglicans.”

That statement overturned the previous assumptions.

Vase and the others had been avoiding a direct confrontation with the Anglicans who specialized in dealing with magicians. Instead, they had turned the Anglicans toward the Amakusas. They were well aware how much weaker they were, but this plan allowed them to still “win”.

But here, Vase was changing that.

“There is a method for handling them. We can crush them given the current situation.”

Part 2

Itsuwa and the other Amakusas had returned to the British mainland using their sailing ships. They had acquired some vehicles and were currently on their way to Stonehenge in Salisbury. They were of course choosing a route that avoided the large cities where the Anglican surveillance was stricter.

“It won’t be long until the Anglicans know we attacked the float,” said Tatemiya in annoyance as he held the steering wheel. “I hope we make it to Stonehenge before they set up any checkpoints.”

“I’m more worried about arriving there before the remnants of the Dusk Waiting to Awaken complete their ceremony.”

“How’s that going, by the way?”

Tatemiya used the rearview mirror to check on Itsuwa and Tsushima who were busy with a large number of papers and clay panels in the back seat. They had gathered everything they could find inside the float Arlands Darkstreet had managed, and this was a portion of that.

“It doesn’t look like a simple numerical or alphabetical cipher. Why do people like this love unnecessarily complex codes?”

“Well, ancient languages are a standard of the Cthulhu mythos.”

“Is that so? This is less like a systematic code and more like a unique language produced by someone’s mental illness. To be honest, it’s pissing me off.”

“Well, a mixture of sanity and insanity is a standard of the Cthulhu mythos.”

The constant mental work seemed to have irritated Tsushima because she threw a thick clay panel against the driver’s seat headrest.

“There was some food in here, right? Hand over the basket in the passenger seat.”

“Looks like fried chicken inside. It was in here when we stole the car, so who knows how long ago they bought it.”

Itsuwa grabbed the basket and noticed it was still a bit warm. That meant the owner had not been asleep at home. Their car had been stolen while they were out shopping.

A quick glance at the clock showed it was past midnight. Losing one’s means of transportation this late would be a problem, so Itsuwa felt a bit apologetic.

“Oh? Are you not hungry?” asked Tatemiya with a grin.

“Th-that isn’t what-…”

“I guess you wouldn’t be. Documents in the Cthulhu mythos are usually made of human skin. No one would want to grab some fried chicken after touching that.”

Itsuwa wordlessly kicked the driver’s seat headrest and the car swerved oddly along the straight suburban road.

Itsuwa and Tsushima used some wet wipes they found in the car to thoroughly wipe their hands before reaching for the fried chicken.

“We have a lot of material here, but we’ve barely analyzed any of it.”

“We’ve only found a few understandable terms. Just like keirin remains unchanged in English, some unique terms and untranslatable strings of characters remain. We might be able to find some clues around those.”

The two girls realized the amount of grease in the chicken was completely different between the top of the basket and the bottom, so they began trying to force the chicken at the very bottom onto the other.

“The spell they are working towards is named Blank Paper. Also, it seems the Cthulhu mythos is not their true use for Stonehenge.”

“On the other hand, it doesn’t look like they’re trying to create completely new magic either.”

Tsushima splendidly avoided the plain breast meat and began a focused attack on the drumsticks often seen in the commercials.

“They seem to believe there used to be a system that is now lost. Their primary goal seems to be putting together eastern and western spells, both old and new, to create something identical to that lost system. They view it like a jigsaw puzzle with no picture of the completed puzzle. In other words, they think the Cthulhu mythos can be used as a gear in that lost system.”

“If they don’t know what this final spell is supposed to do, how can they ever know they were successful?” complained Tatemiya while reaching for some caffeinated gum sitting near the driver’s seat.

“They’ve definitely been doing all this large-scale stuff for the Blank Paper spell, though.”

“They used the special entrance exam for us to enter Necessarius to obtain the free pass. They stole the original grimoire of the Necronomicon from that city library. They used the giant float in the Strait of Dover to bring the underwater city of R’lyeh to the surface. …And all of that was nothing but laying the groundwork for this. They really want to use the infinite possibilities of Stonehenge and all its many theories to complete the Blank Paper spell.”

“What is Blank Paper, anyway? What exactly do they hope to do with Stonehenge?”

“There are a few different plausible theories about Stonehenge and those different theories can be used to produce many different magical symbols like the entire thing is a giant Swiss Army knife. …However, it looks like they’re focusing on its usage as an observatory.”

“You mean the theory that the stone circle is meant to measure the sun and stars? Well, the position of the stars and planets is closely related to the Cthulhu mythos.”

“N-no. Not that.”

“?”

“The position of the sun is used to determine the changing of the seasons. They are focusing on its role as a clock or calendar.”

“They’re after an increase in learning speed. Say, for example, that learning by studying each formula and then discovering a new one would take thirty years. It seems Blank Paper will allow them to finish that in just a few seconds.”

“It may be similar to using the microwave to prepare meals that would normally require a chef. Of course, that puts the chef out of a job if the flavor does not change.”

They would be able to instantly make advances in any field of research and they could also quickly determine what directions of research were dead ends.

Doing that would quickly destroy the advantage the Anglican Church had with its many years of accumulated techniques and knowledge.

For a group attempting to recover a lost system, possessing this booster would greatly change how things progressed. This was a spell they would desperately want both for their overall goal and for their battles with opposing forces.

It was similar to a child drawing a picture in crayon and muttering “I want a magma bomb that can destroy the entire world”, and actual blueprints for the device automatically being filled in.

“This spell is a lot more of a pain to deal with than someone who just wants to show off. I’d prefer dealing with someone developing a flashy laser beam.”

“Why would they do that? They can use Blank Paper to quickly develop a spell to fire a laser beam. They can shoot red beams, blue beams, or whatever they want.”

This spell would rob all history and tradition from the world.

Any rising power could immediately stand at the top of the world.

The power and results of a group used to be related to how much time they spent working on their spells, but this completely overturned that.

“If this one group completes this spell, it’s a problem,” groaned Tsushima. “But if it spreads to other groups, it’s a huge problem. For better or for worse, the world maintains stability by the hierarchy of power. Even if that will hold down some people’s heads. However, this Blank Paper destroys that. Everyone is equal, so anyone can completely change the world if they reach for it. Completely changing the world will become the norm. This will bring about a world in which every single day is filled with war.”

If the world was within anyone's grasp, everything would be equal.

However, happiness is not what everyone would receive equally.

Everyone would constantly remain in equal danger of being destroyed.

Part 3

Arlands Darkstreet was definitely the boss of the Cthulhu mythos magic cabal known as Dusk Waiting to Awaken. Even though Vase knew Arlands had been defeated by the Anglicans on the float on the Strait of Dover, his view of that did not change. He had no intention of taking advantage of the situation to sit at the top of their organization.

Vase was the type who focused solely on supporting others from the background.

No opportunity or crisis would change that side of him.

It was not that he was modest. He simply saw no meaning in taking command. He had respected Arlands Darkstreet and that respect remained strong even now, but the source of his own personality lay elsewhere.

One could call it his rule for survival.

Vase took to heart the idea that pride came before a fall. And pride was not simply overestimating oneself. When one underestimated oneself, that too was being prideful. Being a "confident weakling" or a "baby bird that assumed someone would give it food when it opened its mouth" were both perfectly prideful.

He viewed pride as identical to stagnation.

If one stood at the top, there was nowhere else to go. Overestimation of oneself led to that.

If one had fallen to the bottom, there was nowhere left to fall. Underestimation of oneself led to that.

In both cases, the end result was the same.

Pride.

Stagnation.

And defeat.

Vase was a tough magician who had fought on the front lines of the darkness and survived. He had seen many different deaths: comrades had fallen in battle and enemies had died by his hand.

But in the end, people did not die due to someone else's interference.

It always led back to themselves.

From the moment they grew prideful, the grim reaper slowly approached. People only ever died due to their own actions.

And that was why Vase remained in the background.

He wanted to ensure he did not meet defeat because he grew prideful and stagnant. No matter how great his skills grew and no matter how many qualifications to stand above others he gained, he would never stop where he was. He would ignore what others said and continually set new and higher goals for himself. He was constantly aiming further and higher.

This was necessary for him to survive.

And so Vase was not prideful. He believed there were countless magicians more skilled than him. And to show he always had more room for improvement, he would compete with magicians who were just as powerful or even more powerful.

That was the single effective method of escaping the absolute grim reaper known as pride, stagnation, and defeat.

Part 4

Some men and women ran through the darkness.

Countless spears and arrows focused on the Anglican magicians blocking the escape route. Vase held up a leather belt which was bent into a U-shape. He swung it around and finally let go of one end. Centrifugal force launched a fist-sized red jewel into the gut of his target.

The man did not even have time to gasp.

That jewel was used to call in a frog-like evil god. With the trapezohedron, the crown of Dagon, and the moon lens, precious metals rarely led to anything good in the Cthulhu mythos. The red jewel emitted a pitch black darkness before gravity could pull it down. That darkness absorbed even the target's scream and did not let anything escape.

Of course, the jewels they used were not actually made of mysterious materials impossible for any earthly civilization to create. They were simple glass imitations. However, that was not uncommon in the magical world. Ceremonies in which humans had once been sacrificed could use straw dummies instead to cut down on the costs.

“Don’t stare at the end of the road. Be entranced by the spell before your eyes.” Vase and the others faced their next target while ignoring the darkness lingering in the air.

Even if its original purpose was unknown, Stonehenge was still an important point for the Anglicans. Vase and the others may not have had a chance if they had fought head on.

But that just meant they had to be clever.

The Anglicans had called in all sorts of people to the area around Stonehenge. That included non-magicians like the Highways Agency, environmental protection groups, university research teams, and local vigilante groups. Their affiliations and sizes were completely different and they were often mixed together.

A real magician would assume some team would notice if something happened to another team. And that team would “defenselessly” cause a commotion.

The other option was for a theoretical attacker to cause a common symptom in everyone in the area. They could put everyone to sleep, knock them all unconscious, or distract them, but that common symptom would be immediately detectable.

But if one used a method other than those two options, one could slip past the Anglicans’ surveillance. For example, one could use a method to ensure no one else in the area noticed when someone collapsed.

It was a disgraceful result that was appropriate for the type of person that put innocent civilians in danger to use them in place of sensors.

“So that’s why you had us stop sealing off witnesses before we were done,” commented one of Vase’s men.

“If I wanted to, I could have handled this all a lot more easily.”

For example, Stonehenge was closely related to the course of the sun through the sky. If the entire relic was viewed as a “box” and a trapezohedron was placed in the center, the evil god named Nyarlathotep could be summoned with relatively high quality. Doing so risked exposing Vase and his group to the danger as well, but it would have created a mass of violence great enough to slaughter the entire defending force present.

However, doing so would have been meaningless.

If they used Stonehenge simply as the core of a Cthulhu mythos spell, Vase and the others would reach a dead end. They would be unable to reach the lost system they sought.

And so Vase accepted the disadvantage.

He possessed a card which could exterminate their enemies all at once, but he chose to expose him and his men to danger for the sake of their overall goal.

They went on to attack two or three more groups of Anglican magicians.

If the Anglicans had been able to gather together and attack as a single group, Vase and his group may have lost, but the Anglicans did not know what was happening. They all stood on the same battlefield, but they were isolated and picked off one by one.

“It’s over.”

“Do not confuse your objectives.”

After defeating the enemy forces, Vase and his men gathered in the center of the circle of stones.

Their leader, Arlands, had risked his life to bring R’lyeh to the surface. They now interfered with Stonehenge based on the data that experiment had produced.

“92, A2, 48, CC, 90, 4E, 55, 28, 00, D5, 13, 98, A9, CB, 6D, F7, 30, 56, E1, 91, D4, 0C, B1, 77, 45, 02, AF, 7D, 14, B5, 27, 69, 8C, 80, 4A, 49, DE, FF, 21, A7, 89, 32.”

What Vase said contained no hint of history, tradition, style, or magic, but that was to be expected. This was not meant to explain any of those things. They were attempting to recreate a lost system by filling the gaps with every technique they had, so it was only natural that it did not resemble any of the old methods.

Blank Paper would be complete before long.

That would be the first major step toward developing the lost system.

Vase did not think this day would mark a great change in the world. The existence of the lost system was the proper state of the world. They were correcting the world from an incorrect state. If anything was lost in the confusion, it was something that had been created by mistake. It was no different from something vanishing once a time paradox was resolved.

And so they did not hesitate to bring about the destruction their actions would ultimately bring.

"…"

"What is it?"

One of Vase's men called out to him when he paused for a moment specifically because he had no real reason to stop.

"Can I leave this to you?" he asked while looking around the darkness surrounding them.

"Yes, we have the values needed. But why?"

"Remember what Master Arlands said," replied Vase as he adjusted his grip on the leather sling. "*Assume the enemy will arrive before long*."

And soon thereafter, the enemy did indeed arrive.

Part 5

Itsuwa and the others did not drive their vehicles straight up to Stonehenge. After all, it was a relic in the middle of a remote plain. Magician or not, anyone would notice vehicles driving there in the middle of the night.

They parked the vehicles two or three kilometers away and walked the rest of the way. Elderly Isahaya, short Kouyagi, and a few others volunteered to go ahead as scouts, but they quickly gave up.

As soon as Vase and the other enemies detected the scouts, they sent a flashy sign similar to a flare.

Itsuwa, Tsushima, and the others had been hiding behind the low underbrush, so they stood up and ran full speed toward Stonehenge.

"It looks like they have complete control of the area! Damn them. Who knows how much damage they've done!!" shouted Isahaya as Itsuwa ran past him.

It seemed civilian research groups had been camped out around Stonehenge in addition to the professional magicians because vehicles and tents were visible here and there.

They would have seen the flashy flare-like light as well.

But Tsushima and Tatemiya ignored them.

More specifically, they crouched down and chose a zigzagging path through the areas with more underbrush. More importantly, they incorporated magical symbols into their walking and breathing methods so anyone watching would think they were seeing animals run past.

This involved magic power, so the expert magicians would of course detect it.

Some areas appeared exposed, but they were part of the magic battlefield which was wrapped in several layers of veils. Itsuwa and the others crossed paths with several people's gazes, but were seen by none.

Remaining in the blind spot of a crowd seemed contradictory, but the situation allowed the Amakusas to view anyone following their movements as an enemy.

They did not need to slow down.

Itsuwa remained at full speed as she held up her spear and charged toward a magician of the Dusk Waiting to Awaken.

(Reinforced cutting, wound sealing, and tissue deterioration slowing.)

She applied several non-physical effects to the end of her spear by extracting magical symbols from the way she walked, the way she breathed, the locations of her fingers on her spear, the angle at which she twisted it, and the level of strength in her grip.

Even though she cut through the enemy's flesh, they would not bleed and they would have plenty of time to reconnect the cut portions. But was this done out of kindness or in order to extend their suffering?

However…

"…!?"

As soon as Itsuwa's spear stabbed into the magician's thigh, the high-quality jacket-like material of his pants split apart. However, he did not bleed. The exposed skin was a dull gray. It was covered by a powder-like and thin string-like substance.

Itsuwa knew what it was.

"Mold!?"

"*In their texts*, there are giant insect-like monsters made of fungus named the Mi-go! They have an advanced enough civilization to cut out a human's brain, stick it in a container, and take it on a trip through space! This guy has probably used their motif to strengthen himself for combat!!"

While the fungus armor stopped the spear, the magician muttered something.

And an instant later, something attached to the tip of the spear and started rising up the handle. They were thick tentacles that looked like something halfway between octopus tentacles and shoots of ivy.

Itsuwa did not know what they were or what they would do.

She immediately rotated her spear around 180 degrees in her hand and jabbed the bottom of the handle into the magician's throat.

As expected, this did no real damage.

But the instant she let go of the spear, the countless tentacles climbing the handle shot toward the end of the handle. The magician was struck by his own attack, so he frantically waved his hands around. With a sticky sound like mud hitting a wall, his face was covered by the creepy tentacles.

Itsuwa grabbed the spear from midair, looked down at the magician writhing on the grass, and almost let out a groan.

But she did not have time to save her enemy.

More enemy magicians charged toward her from different directions.

(The spells of the Cthulhu mythos are definitely powerful.)

A yellow medallion decorated with gold and jewels was thrown at her. A wire stronger than a violin string which was made by sewing together spider silk was stretched out toward her. A pocket watch with an irregularly moving seconds hand was held out toward her like a light or a mirror.

(But they all extend beyond what any human can handle, so not even the ones using the spells can control them! That gives me an opening!!)

Itsuwa glanced around at the three attacking magicians and she swung her spear. She did not need great strength. Rather than displaying a great attack, she focused on the softness and flexibility of gymnastics or military exercises. She knocked back the medallion, wrapped the wire around the spear and changed its direction like making a string figure, and struck the upper edge of the pocket watch with the tip of the spear to flip it 180 degrees around.

The phenomena that followed were intense.

A strange person with loose bluish-white skin and wearing yellow rags appeared and it bared its fangs toward the magician who had been struck in the forehead by the medallion. A black shadow that resembled a giant spider appeared over the owner of the wire. A monster that looked less like a hound and more like a bear trap with four animal legs leaped from a crack in the stones of the plain and instantly latched on to the wrist of the person holding the pocket watch.

It all took less than five seconds.

Itsuwa did her best not to focus on the fates of the magicians collapsing like a flower blooming around her. She instead glared at the man standing further down the plain.

He was the magician in control of creating Stonehenge's Blank Paper.

He was Arlands Darkstreet's successor.

He was Vase.

"!!"

Tatemiya, Tsushima, and the others charged toward Vase from different directions. A moment later, Itsuwa followed them. Perhaps in order to open a hole in the Amakusas circle, several magicians charged in to cut off Itsuwa's path. As she knocked a few away with her spear's handle and slid between one's legs, she grew certain that this man was their leader.

Otherwise, the entire group would not charge in so recklessly to protect a single man.

"From the moment I become involved with you, I vow that I will not return alive. Oh mocking god, use the darkness filling this stone to destroy everything for this one last night."

The action Vase took was exceedingly simple.

He took a glittering jewel which was cut complexly and precisely and he squeezed it tightly within his right hand. The barrier of human flesh cut off even the faintest bit of light, so the beautiful jewel was covered in darkness.

"A trapezohedron!!" groaned Tatemiya as he charged forward with an undulating sword known as a Flamberge.

That jewel was a well-known summoning medium in the Cthulhu mythos. A ceremony was carried out where it was enclosed in a box so that all light was cut off. That would summon one of the most famous evil gods, Nyarlathotep.

But it was too late.

Tatemiya tried to come to a hurried stop and Tsushima tried to switch from an offensive stance to a defensive one, but a mass of black smoke had already fallen from the heavens.

Like a passenger plane flying into a cumulonimbus cloud, lightning shot out in every direction and struck Tatemiya, Tsushima, and the others. The shock from the blast of lightning almost knocked Itsuwa backwards even though she had been just out of range due to getting a delayed start.

But she managed to hold her position.

She somehow managed to hold her fear in check.

Tatemiya and the others cried out and collapsed to the ground while Itsuwa stared at Vase who swayed on his feet beyond the black smoke. She swung her spear up in preparation to throw it. Her spear was not made to be thrown, so its center of gravity would prevent it from flying on a stable trajectory.

(St. Andrew's lightning will accurately strike the evil woman who looked down on the innocent young man!!)

She bit her thumb with her canine tooth and used the blood to draw an X on the spear's handle. That was the symbol of a patron saint of the past.

And she threw the spear without hesitation.

A great amount of lightning assaulted the spear. It may have specifically been trying to keep the spear from entering the black smoke or it may have simply been attacking everything that came within range. However, Itsuwa had increased the spear's accuracy using the symbol of a patron saint who was closely related to lightning. The countless lightning attacks were absorbed by Itsuwa's spear which became a mass of bluish-white light. It stabbed into the black smoke and struck Vase's hand which held the summoning trapezohedron.

"...!!"

It seemed Vase had instinctually held his hands up to cover his face when he saw the spear approaching.

But that had been a mistake.

The spear had stabbed into his right hand instead of his face. That was the hand holding the trapezohedron which needed to remain in darkness to call in Nyarlathotep. No matter how forceful the method, any light reaching the jewel was enough to end the ceremony.

The momentum of the spear pushed his hand open and the glittering jewel flew through the air.

The black smoke disappeared in an instant.

(I did it!!)

Itsuwa began running forward once more. Vase had lost his method of attack, so she could end this as long as she grabbed the spear sticking into his hand and used it in an offensive spell. Given that all the other magicians were attempting to protect him, it was possible defeating him would be enough to prevent them from using Stonehenge to create Blank Paper.

But just as Itsuwa saw victory so close by, she saw Vase take an odd action.

The spear was still piercing his hand, but he did not curl up in pain. Instead, he bent backwards like a bow. It looked like he was staring up at the moon or sun, but he was not looking toward the heavens. He was staring at the jewel that glittered in the darkness instead of the moon.

He opened his mouth wide as he looked up at the flying trapezohedron. It looked like he was regrettably watching the goddess of victory that had literally slipped from his fingers.

(No…)

An intensely bad feeling raced down Itsuwa's spine.

(No, this is…!!)

She had realized what he was doing, but it was too late.

She stretched out her hand, but she could not quite reach the spear.

As she leaped forward, Vase unhesitatingly caught the falling trapezohedron in his mouth. And then he swallowed.

All six faces of the trapezohedron were covered in darkness and the summoning of Nyarlathotep began again.

It did not matter if it was in his hand or in his stomach.

"Dammit!!" cried Itsuwa.

While arched backwards, Vase stared at her and gave a thin and mocking smile.

That cruel smile made him look like the very evil god he was trying to summon.

And an instant later, a great roar exploded out as if lightning had struck the entire plain around Stonehenge.

Part 6

Itsuwa lost track of how many times she had spun through the air.

She felt as if she had been floating in the air for a long time when she finally slammed against the ground. Her internal clock returned to normal and she felt intense pain spread out from her spine.

“Gbah…!?”

She forgot how to breathe in. She frantically moved her mouth, but she only received the scent of crushed leaves and the taste of dirt. At that point, she realized she was still rolling even after hitting the ground.

“Gh…gah…!!”

She forced strength into her four limbs.

She tore at the grass with her fingers and dug into the dirt with her shoes as her arms and legs were bear traps biting into the ground. And finally, she came to a stop.

She was only a few dozen centimeters in front of a casually placed stone at one end of the circle of stones.

If she had been even a little slower to recover, she might have hit it.

(What happened?)

Her right eye still hurt. She had started breathing again, but its rhythm was off. She even felt as if her organs were being compressed.

She felt like the damage to her body was never going to leave.

But…

(What…what was that just now? He was summoning Nyarlathotep with that trapezohedron and that black smoke, but *this was something else entirely!* Did someone intervene!?)

Vase had been in control of the area, but he lay collapsed on the grass just like Itsuwa. It did not appear he had been able to brace himself. The top layer of the ground had been torn up along his path as if an asteroid had struck.

And it was not just Vase.

Tatemiya, Tsushima, and the other Amakusas were collapsed as well.

“Wh-who did this?”

Itsuwa heard some kind of impact.

She looked over to where the remaining Dusk Waiting to Awaken magicians had been continuing their ceremony in the center of Stonehenge, but they were easily swept away and thrown through the air. Rather than an attack, it was a merciless and emotionless action reminiscent of brushing dust off of one’s clothes. The difference in strength was simply too great.

The magicians did not move once they landed.

It was unclear if they were even still alive.

The Cthulhu mythos, the magic cabal Dusk Waiting to Awaken, the lost system, the gathering of spells and magical symbols to act as gears in that lost system, Stonehenge, and Blank Paper. All of that lost its strategic meaning. In an instant, the ceremony that had stood at the center of a small world was completely destroyed.

The previous assumptions and the sheer cliff that had lay before the Amakusas eyes had crumbled. A numbness gradually spreading from the back of Itsuwa’s head told her so. This feeling was different from fear. Her senses were numbing over in this hopeless situation and she was trying as hard as possible to focus elsewhere. The only reason Itsuwa knew she was afraid was due to that subconscious dulling of her senses indirectly telling her.

But who was this that was fighting with the Dusk Waiting to Awaken?

“Ah…”

She saw something in the darkness.

When Itsuwa focused, she could make out the vague outlines and she let out a cry.

“Ahh!?”

She recognized the girl.

The girl was wearing metal equipment over her arms, legs, and body like armor, but Itsuwa recognized her face.

She was the one who had been pursuing the Amakusas from the very beginning.

She was a magician of Necessarius, the Anglican Church’s 0th Parish.

In the blink of an eye, she had defeated magicians like a wild beast rushing out after being released from a cage, but she now turned around slowly.

She coldly focused on the one target on the battlefield that was still moving.

Part 7

After Itsuwa and the Amakusas had escaped Freadia Strikers at Sword Sanctuary, she had actually known that something major was occurring at the float on the Strait of Dover.

She had known, but she had ignored it.

“Are you sure you should do that?”

This had confused the spiritual item customization worker who had also been deceived at Sword Sanctuary.

“I cannot overtake them like that,” Freadia had replied.

“?”

“Yes, I could rush to Dover and reach the Amakusas. But if I did that, they would be on their way elsewhere. Even if we are more powerful, they can continually keep us from moving with some form of trickery. If we keep that up, we will lose in the end. …It accomplishes nothing to run all out to catch up to them while out of breath. We need something more if we are to surpass them and truly control the battlefield. Yes, *we need to overlook them this one time*.”

In Freadia’s opinion, it was not their job to pursue runaways from behind.

They were supposed to send out a large number of men and seal off every route. They would boldly wait for the pathetic runaways and quickly arrest them once they crumbled beneath great despair and exhaustion. That was what those who ruled the world did. They could not allow puny runaways to take the initiative.

Chasing them or pursuing them was the wrong approach.

To accurately resolve the situation, they had to overtake them and cut off their route from ahead.

“Fortunately, Sword Sanctuary is a giant weapons storehouse. It’s filled to the brim with dangerous tools you can use here. There are all sorts of tricky spiritual items here. What would you like?”

In a room on the surface area of the sanctuary, the customization worker had lined up a number of documents on a table. They had all contained diagrams of spiritual items and they would all drain the color from the face of anyone who could understand them. None of them had a normal design. They all promised destruction along with success.

No matter how powerful they were, no one would want to use a gun with a danger of exploding or a fighter that had a danger of crashing.

Even when improved as much as possible, many of them maintained a general uncertainty.

However, neither Freadia nor the customization worker had hesitated.

They had both wanted to get back at the Amakusas for deceiving them.

“I’ll take the most dangerous one,” she had replied.

“Don’t make such an exciting request, young lady.”

“Specifically, I’ll take this one.”

“Wah!! That really is the worst one!”

The diagram Freadia had pointed at had described a spiritual item designed like western armor. The customization worker was an expert, but even he could not handle its delicate internal structure. He could make it safe if he had wanted to, but that would eliminate the reason it was useful in the first place. That young man viewed customizing spiritual items like carving away the surface of a gemstone to reveal the valuable gem within, but he was occasionally brought spiritual items that were already optimized and any extra adjustments would be redundant.

“It’s a prototype for a special type of surgical armor. It’s based on the official model used by the knights. Normally, magic power is passed to the armor to greatly increase the wearer’s mobility, but this one is based on the exact opposite concept. …Basically, it’s a spiritual item that doubles the wearer’s magic power up to the absolute limit.”

“Yes.”

Magic was about knowledge and skill.

Creativity mattered the most while inherent talent and potential were less important.

That was certainly true.

On the other hand, magic power acted as the foundational driving force of all magic. If one’s total amount of magic power was increased, the options one had would also increase. One example of this was the Saints who could draw out a portion of the Son of God’s power.

But Freadia had not needed to go that far.

She had only needed to become a joker who could singlehandedly defeat everyone else on the battlefield.

“But magic power is the energy obtained by converting your own life force. Since this armor messes with your magic power directly, it holds the risk of interfering with your life force too. Listen. Your life force is literally your life. Even those combat-obsessed knights raised the white flag and refused to make this standard equipment.”

“If I hadn’t known that, I wouldn’t have chosen it from all these other options.”

“Are you sure you understand? It’s always the people who act like they know what they’re talking about that get careless with the basics.”

“Do you have any other ideas?”

“We have other jobs to handle, remember? We need to construct a security arrangement for the summit of the pound economy leaders. I need you for that, so you shouldn’t take any unnecessary risks.”

However, the customization worker had understood what a threat the Amakusas were. After all, they had infiltrated and escaped from Sword Sanctuary.

He had known it would be difficult to make up for their delay with any normal means.

“Will you help me with this or not?”

“You’ll just steal the armor if I refuse, so I’ll make some last-minute adjustments. That should lessen the risk of losing control.” The customization worker had shrugged. “If you’re going to take this risk, make sure to get back at them. I’m just as pissed as you are that they’re doing whatever they please on our turf.”

Part 8

Freadia’s movements looked mechanical.

Itsuwa was pressing her arms and legs against the ground as Freadia began to move while wearing what looked like armor. She took the shortest, quickest, and best route. In a single breath, she ran close to fifty meters.

It almost seemed like the loud sounds of her footsteps arrived a moment after she did.

“Kh!!”

Itsuwa's spear was not in her hand.

She frantically looked around and saw it was still stabbed into Vase's hand where he lay a distance away. But by that time, Freadia had already coldly arrived before her.

Eerie blackish-purple smoke was compressed into claws which extended from the fingers of the gauntlet on one of her hands. Those claws were over a meter long. At that size, they looked more like swords.

Itsuwa jumped to the side.

Just as she thought she had evaded the strike, the claws sliced at her two or three times.

No actual blood was produced.

However, she clearly felt strength leave the core of her body.

(What is this…?)

Strength left her legs, so she gave up trying to stand. Instead, she rolled along the grass. She gave up on reaching the spear stabbed into Vase's hand. The Amakusas and the magicians of Dusk Waiting to Awaken were lying defeated across the area and Tsushima's rapier happened to be nearby. Itsuwa somehow managed to grab it.

"…"

Like a machine, there was no change to Freadia's expression.

She did not even pursue Itsuwa this time.

She instead swung her claws downwards from where she was. They had only been about a meter long, but they extended to over ten times that. Itsuwa frantically held up the rapier while still lying on the ground.

With a high-pitched noise, the sword and the claws clashed.

Freadia's expression remained unchanged.

She poured on more strength in an attempt to crush Itsuwa. The great pressure from above created an unpleasant creaking noise in Itsuwa's back as it pressed against the ground.

Suddenly, the giant blackish-purple claws burst.

With a sizzling sound similar to water thrown on a red-hot metal plate, the unpleasant smoke-like substance rushed toward Itsuwa's entire body.

“Ggh… Gbh!?”

All of her insides seemed to wriggle like worms beneath her flesh and skin.

A dark red liquid burst from her mouth and nose, but she did not manage to bring her hand up to her mouth in time because her movements had been slowed.

(Essentially…this is the same…as the crystal radio that…used the curse of…the jewel…that brought death…to each consecutive owner. But the density…is completely…different. Even if I…try to add in defensive…magical symbols…it cuts straight…through them!)

But if Freadia Strikers had been able to do this from the beginning, she would never have used the crystal radio. That radio had seemed like the optimized form of that magic. What she was doing now was clearly ignoring her own potential.

And the world was not a kind enough place to allow this convenient miracle without some kind of risk.

(Does that armor…connect to…the wearer and…double their…magic power? No. Magic…power is refined from…one’s life force… It messes with…the route of her life force…as it circulates her entire body…through the blood vessels. It creates…a new path…by sending the life force…from her body into the armor…and from…the armor into her…body. Does that spiritual item create a…method of converting life force…into magic power that is…impossible with…a single body!?)

This was a bit different from using leverage or pulleys to move a large weight with a small force.

It was more like short selling.

It was using something one did not actually possess to earn a lot in return.

By sending the life force into the armor and then back into the body, Freadia Strikers created the illusion that she had the same special constitution as a Saint. Of course, no matter what the armor did, Freadia was still Freadia. She could not become someone else, but this spiritual item made her forget that fact.

There was of course a limit to how much life force one could convert into magic power.

If someone had only a hundred units of life force and they converted a hundred units into magic power, they would die.

But Freadia was falsifying that number, so she could convert large amounts of life force that would brought her into the danger area. While she was continuing to deceive herself, that was fine. Freadia would continue on while the numbers did not add up just as a goldfish flash frozen by liquid nitrogen would forget it had died and live on.

But what if that deceit came to an end?

Freadia would immediately die. It was like someone with only a hundred units of life force making a deal based on the assumption that they had two thousand or even three thousand units of life force. The instant it all came to light, they would be assaulted by tremendous debt. In Freadia's case, she would be sucked dry. Even if a goldfish was preserved in ice, it would die if it was forced to thaw too quickly.

(Come to think of it, the Cthulhu mythos spells were based on the assumption that humans could not handle them, but they gained great power by falsifying the normal hierarchy. However, her armor is more direct and is much riskier! And is there even a safe method of thawing a frozen goldfish!?)

Freadia Strikers trod on the grass as she walked toward Itsuwa.

Her face contained no expression.

That may have been due to her life force being interfered with.

"…Gh…"

Itsuwa had no real reason to continue fighting with Freadia.

The incident caused by Arlands Darkstreet, Vase, and the rest of the Cthulhu mythos magic cabal had been brought to an end. The great attack on England was over. They would probably be punished for stealing cars along the way, but there was no point in running any longer.

But that reasoning was unlikely to get through to Freadia who was coldly moving in to attack anyone in her way.

Also, Itsuwa could not ignore a magician who had chosen a strategy that took human life so lightly.

"Tch!"

Itsuwa placed a single foot on the ground and pushed off with her other foot to spin around on the spot.

She of course had a reason for doing so.

While every second and split second counted, she was not going to make any unnecessary actions.

(My weapon is a rapier. In modern western magic, that can correspond to the dagger of wind or the magic sword that controls magic power as a whole. In Christianity, it is a

symbol of judging evil, of proper punishment, of dragon slaying, of cutting open, and of the Mass where loaves and fishes are distributed evenly.)

Itsuwa thought of magical symbol after magical symbol for the item as she searched for a way out.

After using her two legs to draw out an accurate circle like a human compass, she jumped back with all her strength. After seeing the armor-wearing magician step inside the circle, Itsuwa used the tip of the rapier to toss up a plastic bottle lying on the ground. She caught it in one hand and poured the water over the blade.

(Mass, Holy Communion, Eucharist. With the wine representing his blood and the bread representing his body, the sword symbolically distributes the Son of God. That means I should be able to "cut open" the armor without robbing her of the life force circulating between her and the armor!!)

The circle on the ground was a giant plate.

The rapier washed with water was a consecrated knife.

And on top of the plate was the bread that needed to be cut open.

"Done!!"

If Itsuwa targeted the joints of the armor with the rapier, she would be able to freely cut it open.

That would destroy only the armor without killing the magician within.

"Ohhhh!!"

In that instant, Tatemiya stood up from the ground while letting out a cry.

It was unlikely he thought he could directly defeat Freadia.

But if he could distract her for an instant, Itsuwa would have a chance to attack. Freadia's mechanical movements caused her to evenly ignore the threat before her and turn her head. Itsuwa used that opportunity to gather her remaining strength and stand up.

She charged forward.

"...!?"

But strength suddenly left her knees. Her enemy was directly before her eyes, but she could not reach her. Freadia's amplified curse had eaten into Itsuwa's body. She fell forward but still desperately reached out with the rapier. Unfortunately, the tip did not quite reach.

She collapsed atop the grass.

Freadia's expression remained unchanged to the very end.

She did not hesitate to swing down the claws of that curse again and again until Itsuwa finally lost consciousness.

Part 9

"Gh…"

Itsuwa awoke to a dull pain running up her spine.

She could feel the ground shaking beneath her. She appeared to be inside a small room, but it must have actually been a truck container.

It seemed she had originally been leaning against the wall in a sitting position, but the shaking of the truck had knocked her on her side. Her arms and legs were not bound, but they felt numb and would not move properly. She had lost her sense of pain in her fingertips.

(The curse of the jewel is still in effect.)

She barely managed to move her head enough to look through the container.

Forty or so men and women were contained within just like her. The Amakusas and the Dusk Waiting to Awaken had been thrown inside without distinction. The Anglicans must have viewed them both as enemies.

Itsuwa seemed to be the only one conscious.

Other figures stood in the four corners of the container. They were undamaged, so they were likely Anglicans. Controlling the four corners may have created some form of temple.

She heard a heavy metallic clunking sound from one corner.

She glanced over and saw the previous female magician removing the armor from her arms and legs.

Her face was pale and she was sweating profusely.

This did not look like the end of a standard routine. Who could say how many years of that girl's life that battle had shaved from her lifespan.

(I should have “defeated” her more quickly.)

Itsuwa clenched her teeth and Freadia looked back at her from her corner.

“You’re tough. I’ll give you that.” The magician’s expression made it look like her stomach was filled with blood, but her voice was still forceful. “But a battle with the Anglican Church is not something an individual can handle. You should have given that more thought before picking a fight with us. In fact, you should count yourself lucky this ended before the combat-loving knights and their Knight Leader got involved.” She spoke as if spitting out the words. “Long, painful torture is what awaits you now. You will experience a much less pleasant sort of battle until we have determined you have told us everything about this incident.”

Itsuwa smiled slightly at that.

Freadia’s eyebrows moved slightly.

“If you are a truly skilled hunter who is honest enough to accept a truth you don’t like, then the path ahead will be more painful for you,” said Itsuwa.

“…”

“It does not matter to us what you investigate. You will only find the truth of everything occurring within England, what we’ve done to help, and just how late you were to arrive.”

There were several ways for people who had taken damage to “protect” themselves.

Some people grew unusually weak and dependent when they caught a cold, some people began cleaning their room before a test, and some people worked extra hard when they entered a slump because they feared falling any further.

It was only polite to go along with it.

If the blood rushing to one’s head had dulled their sense of pain, it was considerate to thoroughly continue in the same direction.

“Oh, but that last attack wasn’t bad. You were the one to finish off the magician in charge of their Stonehenge unit. Without that, the situation might have been completely hopeless. …I would like to avoid having a *sad welcome party*, so I’m glad you kept us from having any empty seats.”

“Do you still think Necessarius has a chance of joining us?”

“Feel free to investigate as much as you like. I can already picture your expression clouding over.”

Their gazes clashed and it almost seemed like the flow of air bent.

Freadia wiped away her unpleasant sweat with a handkerchief and forced down something rising up from her stomach.

“You are headed straight for the Tower of London. I have no real reason to protect you and I don’t care what the jailers say about the overcrowded prison. You have just under two more hours to breathe the air of the outside world for the last time. Enjoy it while you can.”

No matter what threats Freadia made, Itsuwa was not worried. They could be blamed for breaking windows and stealing cars, but they had nothing to hide. Once the truth became apparent, their treatment would improve. The Anglican Church was cruel, but she did not think they were foolish enough to hide an inconvenient truth. Otherwise they would not be allowed to operate across the entire world as an anti-magician organization.

That was what she thought. However…

The truck container was suddenly sliced through diagonally from the outside.

“…!?”

It was like cutting a bamboo pipe with a sword. The container was sliced near the middle and slid to the other side of the road while shooting sparks everywhere.

And it did not end there.

There had not been just the one truck. With both the Amakusas and the Dusk Waiting to Awaken, there had been over a hundred people to transport, so they had needed to form a convoy. And that convoy had of course included escort vehicles to deal with attacks from both outside and inside.

But there was nothing there.

Once the container was cut open and Itsuwa’s vision opened up, she could not see any other vehicles. What she did see were dark forms that resembled hunks of metal lying on the grass on the side of the road.

“They were all taken out,” muttered Itsuwa blankly as the wind struck her.

Had more remnants of the Dusk Waiting to Awaken attacked to rescue their comrades? No. If they had people this powerful, they would have been sent in from the beginning.

But then who was it?

“The other vehicles were cut open too!? Is this how the Anglican Church does things? Are you trying to eliminate us to hide your failure!?”

“What are you talking about!? Some Amakusa reinforcements have come to rescue you, haven’t they!?”

They shouted at each other but did not find an answer.

And unfortunately, Freadia had removed her “armor” to prevent it from taxing her body any longer.

There was nothing they could do.

The large truck was made to use the container on the back to maintain a stable weight distribution and that container had suddenly been sliced off. The truck lost its balance and swerved to the side. The driver seemed to panic and slam on the brakes, but that failed as well.

The truck veered off the road and crashed into the uneven field.

Part 10

A figure was visible.

They returned a blade to a large scabbard at their waist. Near the hilt was an eight digit combination lock. The figure used their thumb to set each number to zero.

They looked across the area.

A single road cut through a grassy field. Some hunks of metal had driven off the course and fallen over. There were a lot of them and all of them were torn up.

It was the middle of the night, so no other cars passed by in this remote area. There was no worry of normal people spotting this even without using a people-clearing field.

And even if someone did see it, they could be cut down with a single strike.

The figure pulled out a card case, grabbed a single transparent sheet, and placed it on their tongue. It was a communications spiritual item. The words they spoke would be transmitted to someone else and that person’s voice would reach their ears.

“Situation complete. No enemy combatants remaining. Beginning to check on the details of the attack.”

With that said, the figure began to move. They went around to the remains of each giant truck. They showed no caution. Some people remained in the sliced containers and some

had been thrown out. The figure had been trying to stop the convoy, so it did not matter if the people were alive or dead.

If something did happen or if something annoyed them, they would not hesitate to cut the person down. This was not a beast performing a search while on the lookout for a counterattack from another beast. This was someone taking lives like a carnivore pursuing the smell of an herbivore.

After checking about half of the wreckage, the figure frowned. Once they had checked all of it, they clicked their tongue.

They spoke into the communications spiritual item.

“My check is complete. The target was not located. I repeat, the target was not located.”

“If the initial attack was a failure, then leave as quickly as you can. You don’t want to leave any more information than necessary. This attack was meant to lessen the risk of them detecting us, so it would be meaningless to leave an extra hint behind.”

“Personally, I do not think the attack will be detected until the time for their next periodic report. I should stick with it until then.”

The figure cracked their neck and looked around once more.

“I have the materials needed for that.”

Part 11

Itsuwa and Freadia were hiding a bit away from the road. They were behind some round stones located here and there on the field.

Itsuwa was still under the effects of Freadia’s curse, so she could not move her arms and legs properly. She could not stand on her own, so crawling along the ground was the most she could manage. If she had not been thrown from the container once it was cut free of the truck and if she had not landed on the soft grass of the field, she would not have escaped the mysterious attacker.

Due to the effects of the armor she had used, Freadia was not at her best either. She could cough up blood at any moment. She had shown incredible nerve to desperately pursue Itsuwa after being thrown from the truck.

“That person with the sword is just wandering around,” muttered Itsuwa behind a rock. “But it doesn’t look like they’re going around finishing off everyone.”

“That’s because they attacked in order to save you. Not killing you is proof enough of that,” rebutted Freadia in a low voice.

Itsuwa disagreed.

This person was clearly not an Amakusa. On the other hand, she doubted the Dusk Waiting to Awaken would have kept someone so powerful in reserve when they were betting everything on Stonehenge. It did not make sense for this person to be Anglican either because they had readily attacked Freadia and her team.

They were a brand new side.

But why had they attacked now?

“They aren’t trying to rescue us or kill us, but they’re still wandering around when someone could fight back at any moment. They must be looking for someone, but they can’t find whoever it is.”

Itsuwa stopped speaking and looked up at Freadia who was hiding behind the rock next to her.

“They’re after you.”

Itsuwa and Freadia were the only two hiding away from the site of the attack. That was why the magician with the sword could not find who they were looking for. And Itsuwa had no more value than any other Amakusa member.

That left Freadia as the only option.

“I don’t know who this is, but they’ve been waiting for a chance to attack you. They waited until you left London where the security was too strict.”

Had this sword-wielding magician been monitoring the incident caused by the Dusk Waiting to Awaken for this purpose?

Or had the entire incident been nothing but setting the table for attacking Freadia?

“That means you have something that makes you a target. Give me any information you have. What do you know that would make someone want to kill you to hide it!?”

“I-I don’t know anything like that!!”

The two suddenly fell silent.

Something new was happening in the attack site a bit away.

The sword-wielding magician began dragging the scattered Amakusas and the Dusk Waiting to Awaken magicians into a single spot.

Freadia gulped.

“Are they preparing to execute them?”

“If they’re only after you, they wouldn’t bother,” argued Itsuwa calmly. “They don’t know who belongs to what group, so they’re taking them all hostage. If you don’t come out, they’ll start killing them all one by one.”

“…”

“Please cooperate with me. If you don’t, both of our comrades will be killed. We need to defeat this magician before that happens!!”

CHAPTER 6

Part 1

No reinforcements were coming.

The damage from the jewel's curse left Itsuwa only able to crawl with her arms and Freadia could do no more than stand and walk unsteadily. They could not battle like this. And they did not have enough time to recover enough for that.

The unknown swordsman magician was targeting Freadia who hid behind some rocks alongside Itsuwa.

The magician had no interest in anything else, so she would not hesitate to kill all of the hostages – be they Amakusa, Dusk Waiting to Awaken, or part of the Anglican transport team.

A few stones were located in the field a short distance from the road.

As Itsuwa lay on the grass behind one of those stones, she observed her surroundings.

Meanwhile, the magician had dragged all of the survivors to the road. She made a forceful announcement in a loud enough voice for anyone to hear.

"I know you can hear me! And it does not matter if you cannot. If you do not show yourself, I will kill them one by one. That will likely include people you know and people you don't!!"

"…"

Itsuwa ignored her.

Instead, she used both arms to slowly crawl out from behind the safe stone. She began to move bit by bit, flattening the grass as she went, but she was not headed in the direction of the hostages and the unknown magician.

While keeping low to the ground, Freadia whispered to her.

"W-wait. Where do you think you're going? That swordsman is looking for us."

“She wouldn’t shout like that if she knew where we were. And once she grows impatient, she really will kill the hostages. We need to put together a plan while she’s going through the necessary opening act.”

Itsuwa could only move by crawling, so charging at the swordsman magician would be meaningless.

However, Itsuwa and Freadia were the only two who could move. If they were defeated, no one would remain to save Tatemiya, Tsushima, and the others.

Fleeing was of course out of the question.

Not only would the hostages be slaughtered, it was doubtful they could escape in their current state.

“…”

A hunk of metal had fallen near the stone.

It was a piece of a truck the swordsman magician had sliced. The rapid loss of mass had altered the vehicle’s center of gravity, causing it to lose control, drive off the road, and cut across the field.

Itsuwa used both hands to climb inside the metal container that had been cut diagonally like a bamboo pipe. Not much remained inside. Naturally, there were no people inside. Itsuwa did not see the armor Freadia had worn. It may have been thrown out of the truck once the truck veered off the road. Either way, it was unlikely to be of any use.

Itsuwa grabbed a heavy knapsack which had likely been supplied by the Anglicans. She then rolled back out onto the grassy field.

She rummaged through the bag.

(A telescope, a bundle of blank parchment, a pen, and an ink bottle. A map, a compass, and a flashlight. Matches, a fruit knife, and…is this a sextant?)

The contents of the bag were odd, even for camp gear or survival goods. They were most likely meant for ceremonies. The tools used for determining the location and angles of the stars were obvious, but the ones for setting fires and cutting things were also used for magic. The parchment and pen used for making charms may have been the most obvious of all.

But…

(Nothing to break a curse with.)

Itsuwa gave a soft sigh.

Freadia likely had no intention of breaking the curse she had put on Itsuwa. The girl did not want her escaping in the confusion. In that case, she could only wait for the curse to weaken with time. It seemed they had to resolve the situation with things as they were.

Itsuwa gave up on breaking the curse and pulled out the small telescope.

The cylinder was collapsed like a police baton, so she extended it in her hands. She looked through it and made the observations she had been unable to make before.

“The road is about fifty meters away. Counting Amakusa, Dusk Waiting to Awaken, and Anglican, there are 80-100 hostages. They are sitting in a line along the road. …If they all tried to run at once, they would simply fall prey to the magician’s sword.”

“I don’t see how a single person can monitor a hundred people.”

“What good would it do for them to scatter in every direction? This is an empty field. This magician has a spell that let her slice every single one of the trucks in two. It shouldn’t be difficult for her to cut down each of them in turn.”

The field contained a few large stones and the remains of the destroyed trucks, but the cover was not perfect. They could not move to the hostages while remaining hidden. They would be spotted eventually.

Looking through the telescope showed that the asphalt of the road had been sliced apart. The swordsman magician must have secretly attacked from the field on the other side of the road. The grass there had been gouged out like giant claw marks.

And those claw marks gathered at a single point.

The different attack had been made in a fan shape from that spot.

“That’s a distance of fifty to seventy meters. She used some kind of giant blade to attack the trucks without moving from a single spot. It might have been closer to a long-distance attack from a gun turret than a sword attack.”

Itsuwa and Freadia were approximately fifty meters from the road. That meant the swordsman magician would mercilessly slice them in two if she spotted them. The stones and scraps were unlikely to function as shields.

(The enemy…)

As she lay down, Itsuwa moved the telescope over to view the scene through the grass.

(The enemy magician…)

Someone stood atop the asphalt.

She walked irregularly back and forth among the sitting hostages.

Freadia asked a question while crouching down.

“I can tell this is a woman, but can you tell any more with the telescope?”

“She has short red hair, has white skin, and is tall. She is wearing a black leather jacket, a tight skirt, and a fur scarf. …Wearing animal skin and fur might provide some kind of meaning for her. She also has a scabbard at her waist. It looks to be about seventy centimeters long. It looks like it holds a rapier or some other sword used with one hand. Oh? What is that?”

Itsuwa focused on the scabbard hanging from the leather belt at the woman’s waist.

A device resembling an eight digit combination lock was embedded near the opening of the scabbard.

(That isn’t just a lock. The large number of digits concerns me. It uses numbers, so do they represent letters of the alphabet for some kind of spell?)

Suddenly, the swordsman magician moved away from the area visible through the telescope.

(Did she spot us!?)

Itsuwa frantically moved her face from the telescope and lay as low on the ground as she could.

But the magician did not use the sword magic that had so easily sliced through the convoy of trucks. Itsuwa held her breath and looked through the telescope once more.

And she grimaced.

“If you will not come out on your own, I will follow through with my threat,” said the swordsman magician. “Just to be clear, I have no idea who is important and who is not. Similarly, I do not know anything about your interpersonal relationships with your colleagues. Don’t complain if the first person to die is more important to you than a friend.”

She chose one of the hostages and grabbed the hostage’s hair.

The woman had not moved from the telescope’s view because she had noticed Itsuwa and Freadia. She had simply taken an irregular path in order to approach the first person she had chosen.

She grabbed the hostage’s hair and dragged the hostage from the line of other hostages.

Itsuwa recognized the hostage.

(Tsushima-san!!)

“Let me spell out the situation for you. No convenient hero is going to arrive. You cannot stop my blade with emotions brought on by a story of your past or persuasion. I will continue executing these hostages with the regularity of a clock’s hands. There is only one way to stop this.”

They currently had no way to save Tsushima.

As Itsuwa held her breath and moved her face from the telescope, the swordsman magician continued speaking.

“I assume you understand, so I will now begin.”

Part 2

Slowly, Itsuwa let out a short, short, and then long breath.

She changed her focus.

“What are we going to do?” asked Freadia while crouching down. “That doesn’t sound like an idle threat. With that many hostages, she has no reason to hold back. If we do nothing, she really will kill your comrade.”

“What we must do hasn’t changed.” Itsuwa’s voice was oddly low. “We can’t win in a straight fight. We don’t stand a chance. Our only hope is to determine what kind of spell that swordsman is using and send that spell out of control. The first thing we need is information. We need to know how exactly she attacked the trucks. Not a guess, but something we can actually use to reach an accurate conclusion.”

“I doubt we have time for that. She’s going to kill the first one right away and she has no reason to change her plans.”

“If we fail here, we won’t be able to save any of them!!”

Freadia had started to slowly stand, so Itsuwa gave a warning.

“The only way to save everyone is to analyze that swordsman’s spell. She has no reason to release everyone if we go along with her demands, so don’t think about heroically surrendering in order to save them all. *If you try to do that, I will kill you here.* Once the swordsman has you, she’ll probably kill all the hostages to keep them silent. Your surrender would be the quickest route to a slaughter.”

Her reasoning was logical.

Antitrust and fair trade laws did not apply in a hostage exchange. The Anglican Church specialized in anti-magician activities and worked around the world, but this magician had attacked without hiding her face. It was obvious that she would have problems later if she let the hostages go. If she would get what she wanted whether she killed the hostages or not, killing them would reduce the overall risk.

But…

"Then what about the first one? Isn't she…?"

"There is no way to save Tsushima." Itsuwa clenched her back teeth. "There just isn't!! Our only option is to search for a means of defeating this magician while listening to her screams. Do you think that won't affect me any? But we have to accept it!! If you understand at all how I am feeling, then quit complaining and help me find that swordsman's weakness as quickly as possible!! Tsushima may have been the first one chosen to be executed, but no one knows who will be chosen next. It might be another Amakusa, it might be someone from the Dusk Waiting to Awaken, or it might be one of your fellow Anglicans!! It should be in your best interests to help me!!"

"…"

Freadia Strikers hesitated for a moment and looked back and forth between Itsuwa and the swordsman magician.

Finally, she gave a small nod.

The look in her eyes and the feelings inside them had clearly changed.

"You use the telescope to carefully observe her movements, mannerisms, and behavior. In this darkness, I doubt I could find much information even from right next to her."

"What will you do?"

"I'll check the cut." Freadia used her thumb to point toward the remains of the large truck Itsuwa had approached earlier. "That is another information source. No matter how skilled, no magician would go out of their way to reveal the identity of their spell, so simply observing her might not give us the answer. But we might be able to supplement the missing information from elsewhere."

As she spoke, Freadia pulled a thin chain from within her clothes. It held a loupe, a small paintbrush, a white light made from a number of LEDs, thick black paper the size of a business card, and other items. The chain contained all of the tools usually used by jewelry appraisers.

Her specialty was folklore that fell into the "cracks" and had no religious basis. And of those, she was especially focused on the cursed jewel that would kill each of its owners despite having no real history to it.

Itsuwa adjusted her grip on the telescope.

She was in charge of watching the target, so she could not avert her gaze from the "painful sight" that target was going to cause. The reason Freadia had not taken the telescope from her may have been out of respect for Itsuwa's resolve. The girl may not have been aware of it, though.

"Understood. Please do."

After saying nothing more than that, Itsuwa focused on the telescope while lying in the grass.

She heard Freadia's quiet footsteps moving away.

In the circle of the telescope, the swordsman magician held Tsushima's hair and casually threw her onto the asphalt. She reached for the sword at her waist. For an instant, Itsuwa's vision grew distorted, but she endured and continued watching.

(The dials?)

With one hand on the hilt, the magician reached her other hand for the scabbard and spun the eight numbers with her thumb. 20947901. As Itsuwa frantically read that number, the swordsman magician slowly pulled the blade from the scabbard.

It was a thin sword that glowed a dark red.

Rather than a blade meant to tear through flesh, it was shaped like a stake meant to pass through the gaps of armor.

Its shape did not match that of the scabbard. The blade itself did not appear to be made of metal. It was not that the material on the blade's surface was emitting light. It looked more like colored light had been directly compressed into the shape of a blade.

(There is no real blade. Is it like a summoning? Does the spell call in a blade with special properties?)

Itsuwa began to think, but her thoughts were quickly cut off.

The swordsman magician suddenly and unhesitatingly stabbed the dark red blade into Tsushima's side.

"Gh…ghh. Gbh…gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???"

Tsushima's arms and legs flailed violently. These were clearly involuntary actions.

She was like an insect pinned to a board while still alive.

The dark red blade stabbed out through Tsushima's back and into the asphalt below her. Itsuwa clenched her teeth and suppressed a dizziness that threatened to fill her vision. She had to acquire as much information as possible and put together a plan to stop that swordsman.

(She isn't dead. She isn't dead! The swordsman intentionally used a thin gimlet-like blade. She most likely avoided any organs or major blood vessels for the first strike. We can still do something!!)

With a sticky movement, the swordsman magician pulled out the blade.

Tsushima doubled over while holding her side, rolled onto her side, and curled up in a ball. The magician returned the blade to the scabbard without bothering to wipe off the blood.

However, this did not mean it was over.

Her thumb spun the scabbard's dials once more. This time, she set it to 11790045.

(The number is different.)

The new sword removed from the scabbard was made of a pale blue light. It almost looked like ice cream. Itsuwa found it in poor taste, but the blade may have been modeled after bat wings or burning flames because several streamlined tips extended out from it. It looked like a single sword created by joining together several axes. It was clearly too large to fit inside the scabbard.

This blade was not made to stab; it was made to cut through something.

No matter what part of Tsushima it was used on, it would lead to nothing good.

"There is more than one type of blade. The properties of the blade change based on the dials. But are the blades being created, swapped out, or called in? What foundation from which religion is being used with those dials?"

The swordsman magician slowly approached Tsushima who lay curled up on the road.

This was not enough.

Itsuwa could not put together a plan for a counterattack.

She could not save Tsushima.

She could only watch as the swordsman magician swung up the blade which spread out complexly. Her heart wanted to cast everything aside and shout out in anger, but Itsuwa used all her strength to suppress the desire.

It happened an instant later.

An unpleasant noise rang out.

One of Tsushima's legs was severed near the base and flew through the darkness of the night.

Her consciousness clearly snapped.

Itsuwa thought the muscles in her own face were going to tear her skin to pieces. Her tear glands writhed unnervingly. A strange liquid poured out. But even so, she did not lose her composure or lash out. Despite the sight before her, she remained calm. That fact was a second shock to her mind.

"I understand it a bit now." After investigating the cut on the truck container, Freadia returned to where Itsuwa lay hidden. "There was no roughness to the cut. This cut was not simply made with metal against metal. Also, it was extremely faint, but I detected a small repelling force between the cut and my jewel."

"…?"

"That means her method of attack is related to jewels just like mine."

That suggested a legend of swords that used jewels. That left a great number of options. And it did not necessarily have to be limited to jewels. There were plenty of stories of blades that produced a legendary power by placing a special object on the hilt of the sword.

Itsuwa spoke quickly.

"It's those dials. The swordsman can freely change the shape and properties of the blade in the scabbard by changing the numbers on those dials. Do you have any ideas?"

"What matters is where the stone is located." Freadia toyed with the appraising loupe in her hand. "Its location would be directly linked to the blade's attack power. Most likely, those dials contain small stones arranged like a gear. The numbers aren't what matter. By spinning the dials, the arrangement is changed and the stone with the wanted properties is created. The sword's properties are changing based on the changes to the stone. The dials on the scabbard are the true essence of the spiritual item."

"But do you know what religion it's based in?" Itsuwa was panicking. "Celtic mythology, Norse mythology, Greek mythology, Buddhism, Shinto, Indian mythology, Aztec mythology, Mayan mythology, and Christianity. The world is filled with legends of weapons strengthened by special stones and other objects."

"Likewise, swords themselves have spread to all parts of the world. Yes, and this magician has chosen a Western European design. The fur and leather she is wearing must have

cultural meaning as well. The most well-known Western European cultures that fight with swords and wear animal skins would be Celtic and Norse."

"There are plenty of legends in just those two. We don't need an encyclopedia filled with knowledge. Without a single answer, we can't defeat that redhead!!"

"*The fact that we don't have a single answer is an answer in and of itself.*"

Freadia smiled thinly as she made that strange announcement.

Itsuwa frowned and Freadia continued.

"If someone is injured by a certain sword, they can never be healed unless the wound is scraped by the jewel attached to the sword's hilt. That legend is not exclusive to the Norse or Celtic cultures. It has spread to all of Europe. Sometimes it is actually part of the hilt and other times it is in a small bag which is tied to the hilt. And this legend of the sword and stone has spread *despite no one ever pinpointing where exactly it came from.*"

It was a story related to jewels. And it was also a piece of folklore that had fallen into the "cracks" and had no clear religious basis. It may have only been because Freadia used a spell in that same category that she had been led to this answer.

"The injuring sword and the healing stone form a set. By combining it with the healing stone, the properties of the corresponding sword should be drawn out. That matches what you saw."

"Then…"

"Do you remember the numbers on the eight dials? If we steal that scabbard and set it to the numbers used to cause the wounds, we should be able to heal the hostage's wounds. No matter how badly she has been injured, we still have a chance of saving her." Freadia Strikers smiled a bit. "Also, the shape and properties of the blade are changed based on the properties of the stone created by the dials. In that case, adding something extra into that cycle should cause her to lose control of her own powerful spiritual item."

Part 3

The distinctive high-pitched scream of a girl filled the nighttime field.

Like cutting firewood with an axe, the magician had casually lopped off a leg. She then returned the sword to its scabbard. The sword was quite wide and should not have fit into the scabbard, but it unnaturally slipped inside like colored water washing into a drain.

She set all the number dials to zero.

This returned the spiritual item to a neutral state.

"..."

The screams of the hostage would help draw out the hostage's hidden comrade. But if it continued at the same intensity, people would grow used to any stimulus. Continuing this obvious violence would simply numb over any listeners' hearts. Once they fell into that state, they would not be shaken no matter how many hostages were killed afterwards.

(I'll change the type of scream.)

The magician gave it some simple thought.

(I'll crush her throat to muffle her screams. Once I kill her, I'll use a male hostage. It's the same as having a meal rotation. By making the variation random, it will continue to provide a proper stimulus.)

Suddenly, the magician heard a rustling noise.

Something other than the wind was moving through the grass.

"..."

She looked over and gave a thin, thin smile.

A single figure stood in the moonlit field.

The target she had been searching for had shown herself because she had been unable to withstand the screams.

♦

A short distance away, Itsuwa was using her arms to crawl along. Her eyes opened wide when she noticed Freadia Strikers's sudden action.

(This isn't what we planned!!)

In their quick strategy meeting, they had agreed to use the blank parchment and pen in the knapsack. Itsuwa had previously used a Mandala to trick Freadia. A Mandala used complex patterns to make one think of the laws of the universe and the principles of the gods, but rearranging the patterns *could send a desired image into the viewer's head.*

The swordsman magician could produce the type of sword she needed by spinning the dials on the scabbard. If Itsuwa could make her think the numbers said something else, there was a chance of leading her to lose control of her power.

Originally, Itsuwa was going to draw Mandalas on the blank pieces of parchment and scatter them into the wind. If that defeated the magician by sending her sword out of control, that was fine. If she could still move, she would have lost her primary weapon, so Freadia could incapacitate her with her crystal radio.

That had been their agreement.

So why had Freadia suddenly stepped out into danger?

♦

Freadia Strikers did not hesitate to stand up from behind the grass.

The swordsman magician was still far away.

Those fifty meters were almost an absolute barrier to Freadia who could only stagger forward due to the armor she had worn.

Meanwhile, her opponent could slice her in two with a single sword strike. That had been made very clear from her unilateral attack on the convoy.

(That Amakusa's plan is decent, but it could still fail.)

With no streetlights and no telescope to aid her sight, Freadia could not see any details of the figure standing on the road. However, she could tell that the magician began to pull out something near her waist.

(But that girl would never have agreed to a plan this risky!)

There was a flash of light.

A direct slicing attack flew from the scabbard like an Eastern iai strike.

Most likely, this was the same attack used against the trucks. It extended several dozen meters, so it looked more like a projectile than a blade. It flew horizontally toward Freadia from the right.

This attack had been enough to slice apart trucks weighing easily over twenty tons.

If it struck a flesh-and-blood human with no magical defensive measures, the blade would not even catch on their bones. Freadia should have been sliced in two as easily as tearing wet paper.

However…

With a high-pitched noise, Freadia forcefully pressed against the sword of light with her palm.

Due to the darkness and distance, Freadia could not see the details of the attacker's face, but she felt the magician's shock through the sword.

She held a single jewel in her hand.

But it was not part of Freadia's collection as a specialist in cursed jewels.

(This is the trapezohedron!!)

This was the spiritual item Vase of the Dusk Waiting to Awaken had used. In complete darkness, the jewel would summon an evil god named Nyarlathotep. After his defeat, Vase had been forced to cough it up from his stomach to eliminate that danger.

Freadia had used that.

But not as a shield to block the blade. The stone was not known for being sturdy.

She had used it in another way.

(The injuring sword and healing stone form a set. But it is actually unclear how the bond between sword and stone is created. Even if the stone is embedded in the hilt, some legends have it removed from the sword when used to heal the wounds. Even when removed from the sword, an invisible bond exists between them.)

The trapezohedron and some small "components" fell from her palm.

They were extremely primitive electronic components.

They were the components of a crystal radio.

They were the parts needed to insert the stone inside her spiritual item and therefore inside her magic.

(I do not know how the scabbard's dials and the blade extending from the hilt are connected. But if I interfere with an even more powerful and more conductive method, my stone should overwrite hers and the blade should react!! Regardless of her wishes, it will take a form corresponding to the trapezohedron!!)

To do that, she had needed to receive a direct attack.

More accurately, the blade had to come into direct contact with the trapezohedron and the crystal radio.

The swordsman magician kept the sword and stone separated. No matter what method she used to connect them, direct contact would provide more conductive control.

And…

(Your method is based on the assumption that the injuring sword and healing stone are a set.)

The trapezohedron was a cruel stone meant to summon Nyarlathotep.

"*It's time you produced a sword so horrible that this stone's effects qualify as healing!!*"

Everything changed in an instant.

The blade grew pitch black. It lost all form.

Perhaps as a symbol of being "beyond human control", it seemed to forget that it was a sword. It transformed into a pitch black explosion and evenly attacked all nearby forms of life.

With an explosive noise, the swordsman magician holding the scabbard was thrown through the air.

And so was Freadia.

"I had to deal with the Amakusas and then that strange magic cabal. I've been up against nothing but irritating opponents."

As a bizarre floating feeling overwhelmed her senses, Freadia smiled a bit and stared at her target who was flying through the air just like her.

"But even I hate sinners, dammit."

With a loud noise, her body slammed into the ground.

Part 4

"Gh…"

Itsuwa lay on the grass and shouted toward Tatemiya and the other Amakusa members.

"Tatemiya-san! Take her scabbard from her. The numbers are 20947901 and 11790045. You should be able to heal Tsushima-san's wounds with them!!"

With that said, Itsuwa crawled along the grass to slowly approach Freadia's collapsed form.

In a way, Tsushima's injuries could be viewed as a type of pre-established harmony, so they could be healed with the healing stone.

But Freadia was different. Her situation was clearly out of the ordinary. It was unlikely she could be safely healed with only the swordsman magician's method.

As she lay on the ground, around half of Freadia's face was oddly dark. It appeared she could not move the right half of her body properly and her fingertips were only twitching.

But she was conscious.

She could not turn her head, but she moved her eyes to look at Itsuwa.

"If I was taken out like this, it means the enemy was as well. These injuries mean I can rest easy."

"This is no time to be saying that!"

"If I get back to an Anglican cathedral, I can have a curse of this level broken. After all, we do travel all over the world to resolve incidents like this."

The elderly Isahaya and the large Ushibuka approached.

Itsuwa leaned on Isahaya's shoulder and Ushibuka carried Freadia.

"The others are looking through the destroyed trucks," said Isahaya after Itsuwa explained the situation.

"I thought the communications spiritual items had been destroyed."

"Yes, but the convoy was made up of over ten vehicles. If we gather the usable parts, we should be able to restore one working spiritual item."

At any rate, the incident was over.

The direct threat was gone. Tsushima's injuries were bad, but they could be neatly healed with the healing stone. If they could use a communications spiritual item, they would only need to wait for Anglican reinforcements to arrive.

With those thoughts in mind, Itsuwa moved toward the road while almost being carried by Isahaya.

Tatemiya's hands were covered in blood from treating Tsushima and he tossed something toward Itsuwa.

"We found this in the attacker's pocket. Does it tell you anything?"

Itsuwa caught it in one hand and saw it was an ID.

The name was Emilie Fordia.

The nationality was…a name Itsuwa was not sure she could pronounce.

She knew it was a small island nation near the equator in the Pacific Ocean, but she was not confident in her ability to accurately point it out on a world map.

She had no guess as to who the attacker might be.

She turned toward Freadia Strikers who Ushibuka gently lowered to the asphalt.

She prepared to tell the girl what the ID said, but Freadia's eyebrows writhed a bit.

And she simply stared forward.

"Did you figure something out?" asked Itsuwa.

Freadia did not respond. Her mind was filled with the conversation she had had with her colleague in Sword Sanctuary.

"—Do you have any other ideas?"

"—We have other jobs to handle, remember? We need to construct a security arrangement for the summit of the pound economy leaders. I need you for that, so you shouldn't take any unnecessary risks."

"Oh…"

After the Amakusa member lowered her to the road, Freadia stared blankly at the unconscious swordsman magician.

The security plan for protecting an important VIP or transporting money was often kept secret from everyone but the planners until the day of the event. Needless to say, that was meant to prevent leaked information from leading to a large-scale attack.

Putting together those security plans was left to people like Freadia who magically protected the peace for a different reason than with the "official" peacekeepers like the London police.

If an enemy were attempting to abduct her, that would normally mean someone was trying to drag that security plan out of her so they could assassinate a VIP of the pound economy.

But that had not been the case this time.

When the swordsman magician named Emilie had drawn her out, she had not hesitated to try to kill her. That was not the behavior of someone who wanted information.

That meant it was the opposite.

The attack was meant to eliminate information, not gather it.

(Due to the nature of this VIP security plan, we have to focus on more than just the British people involved. If we do not know how many people we must protect, we can't put together a plan, so we need detailed information on the makeup of the VIPs' families. We also don't want explosives hidden in personal items, so we need a detailed list of what they will be bringing with them.)

Of course, few VIPs would simply agree to hand over their possessions for an inspection.

Those VIPs were masses of pride befitting (or exceeding) their important positions. And as humans they had things they were embarrassed about just like anyone else.

Some would bring their mistress along and claim they were a secretary.

Some would try to buy tons of golf sets with public money.

However, that mistress might actually be an assassin and the golf club might contain a hidden bomb that would blow the VIP's return flight to smithereens.

For that reason, the person in charge of the security plan had to go over everything surrounding the VIPs (to an extent that did not cause any problems for the Anglican Church as an organization).

If someone was truly trying to bring someone or something dangerous into England, they would find it convenient if one of those few people in charge like Freadia was eliminated at the last second.

That meant the enemy and this attacker were from…

"The pound economy!?"

Part 5

The London Borough of Lambeth was lined with relatively modern office buildings for a city that was filled with history and tradition. In preparation for the summit meeting the following day, the representatives of the pound economy were spread out over multiple high-class hotels.

The artificial lights produced an uneven scenery.

Aili Hexenphobia narrowed her eyes as she looked out on the night scenery outside the window. She was in her late twenties and she had already become the representative of an entire nation, albeit a small one. There was a simple reason for this. The truly clever and powerful old men had not wanted her position.

She was a figurehead.

She was a puppet.

“Emilie missed her periodic report. I suppose that means she was defeated.”

She understood the situation surrounding the Cthulhu commotion, yet she had still arranged for that assassination of Freadia Strikers. Even if the Dusk Waiting to Awaken had done a better job than expected, Emilie had supposedly had enough power to slaughter Arlands Darkstreet, Vase, and the rest of the cabal singlehandedly.

The fact that Emilie had been defeated meant the Anglican Church was as powerful as they were reputed to be.

As soon as Aili came to that conclusion, the room’s door suddenly opened. The inner bolt had not been locked. The two bodyguards outside the door had insisted on that so they could swiftly evacuate her in case gas or smoke was sent inside the room.

However, it was unusual for someone to enter without knocking.

“You arrived quickly.”

While wearing a gown, Aili did not bother standing from the comfortable club chair. She merely leaned back in it.

The bodyguards’ expression did not change.

It seemed these were not the private soldiers waiting outside the door. They were Anglican magicians.

“Prime Minister Aili Hexenphobia, I apologize for disturbing you now, but please come with us. The attack on Freadia Strikers you ordered has failed.”

“I didn’t actually order that. But this is why I said to flee if the initial surprise attack did not work. What a failure.”

Aili shrugged in the club chair and crossed her legs.

And she smiled.

It was entirely possible she could no longer leave England alive, and yet she smiled.

“But you should have given this more thought if you thought it was a sudden, unplanned, and hastily thrown together incident. This goes surprisingly deep. This is a war between the old suzerain state of England and forty affiliated nations that are still part of the so-called ‘pound economy’.”

“…”

“The designs of our flags have changed? Our official languages have changed back? We are allowed to use independent currencies? Do you really think that is enough to make our bonds vanish? Ridiculous. The ley lines and other veins of magical energy are still artificially altered. You are still drawing in energy from around the world in order to spread your influence. As long as this structure remains, we cannot be free. If you wanted to, you could rob us of our magical foundation and cause all of our crops to fail.”

Aili’s smoothly flowing voice continued as she smiled thinly.

“You force all these burdens on us like you are some kind of king. You have gone too far. We can no longer tolerate this. And that is why your actions here are meaningless. This problem is too large to disappear if you merely defeat me. The stage has already been set.”

“Take her away,” spat out one of the magicians, cutting her off. “You can tell all this to those specialized in dealing with people like you. You can talk about this ‘truth’ until your throat goes dry once you’re deep underground.”

“Oh, one other thing,” calmly added Aili as her wrists were grabbed. “Do you really think *I would be foolish enough to put together a strategy that could be stopped just because it was discovered partway through?*”

Immediately afterwards, a quiet sound could be heard.

A duralumin attaché case in a corner of the room had opened on its own. And it did not stop there. The same sound repeated countless times. Like flipping over a spread out deck of cards, the entire floor transformed into the color and texture of duralumin. The change reached the walls and ceiling and ultimately enveloped the entire hotel room.

“Kh!!”

While trying to drag Aili from the room, the magicians holding her arms turned toward the door. But the exit was gone. Both the door and the window had been covered over by the glittering silver. It was impossible to tell if this was truly the hotel room or if it was some other space.

Aili continued smiling while sitting in the club chair.

“This is just meant to slow you down. It will vanish on its own once enough time passes. Of course, it should all be over by the time that happens.”

“What… What are you trying to do!?”

“Nothing much. There is a simple spell related to the last moments of St. George. We merely hope to activate that in London.” Her voice was so lighthearted that it almost seemed she would start humming. “St. George is famous for slaying a dragon, but his fate was also quite dramatic. Roman priests urged him to denounce his faith, but he prayed to god and ‘something’ like a meteor fell from heaven, destroying the Roman priests and their temple. That is the legend we are using.”

However, Aili’s group was not trying to slaughter the residents of London.

The targets of their hatred were those who had thorough knowledge of the underside of the world and kept the members of the pound economy bound to England.

Aili’s group would rob them of their special power, weakening them, and then work out a deal to be freed from them.

“In other words, it is all over once the spell activates. You could say the spell thoroughly destroys every temple, spiritual item, and other magical device in range. Incidentally, that range is twenty kilometers in every direction. London will become a giant magical vacuum.”

What mattered most with magic was the human body that refined life force into magical power, but there was a limit to the magic a single body could accomplish. If the spiritual items, temples, and cathedrals that provided powerful support were all lost, the Anglican Church and Necessarius would be unable to function.

The Anglican Church kept the peace of the magical world, so it was possible others would try to take advantage of their downtime.

The longer it took them to recover, the more magical incidents would occur around the world and the more damage would be blamed on the Anglicans. That would only hurt England’s standing.

And most importantly, lots of people around the world would die to drive home that impression.

“Where did you set it?” groaned one of the magicians. The magician’s voice quickly grew to a shout. “Where did you set that dangerous spiritual item!?”

“Weren’t you listening? This plan cannot be stopped just by questioning me.” Aili shrugged in the club chair. “You turned your focus to Emilie. You had to solve an unnecessary mystery before arriving at me. That alone bought enough time. I had actually hoped for the countdown to reach its end while you stared in confusion at Freadia Strikers’s decapitated head, but having you spend that time dealing with Emilie’s attack worked just as well.”

“…”

“Now, a question. How much longer until London’s magical foundation is utterly destroyed? 120 seconds? 60 seconds? 30 seconds? Ah ha ha!! Did the units of seconds scare you!? If you weren’t expecting that, you are much, much too late!! The only reason you can see me now is because you have fallen so far behind that I have lapped you!!”

If the Anglican Church’s headquarters of London had all of its spiritual items and temples destroyed and Necessarius lost most of its power, chaos would spread around the world. That overwhelming wave would wash everything else away. They would be unable to carry out normal investigations. Without any ability to gather and manage information, no one could pursue Aili. She could escape.

“Now!! Be destroyed, London! Let the resulting chaos weaken England and lead to our liberation!!”

There was no chance of a counterattack.

There had never been anyone who could accomplish anything of the sort.

Even though the mastermind sat before them, the Anglican magicians had no way of stopping Aili Hexenphobia.

And…

The spell activated.

It extracted magical meaning from St. George’s fate to destroy every single spiritual item and temple in London.

It produced no noise.

It even seemed as if time had stopped.

The silence was almost painful and it continued for quite some time.

Finally, Aili’s barrier-like spell ended. The silver-colored walls covering every surface of the room vanished and the high-class hotel room returned.

Even so, the Anglican magicians did not move for a while.

Aili was smiling.

But the smile was frozen on her face.

“Wait…”

Aili Hexenphobia had been acting like the ruler of the world, but now she muttered uncertainly.

It was as if something definitive had been peeled away.

“*Why is nothing happening? The spell should have activated, so why is London unharmed!?*”

Suddenly, the room’s phone emitted a high-pitched electronic tone.

However, she had no idea who it could be. All of those within her group would contact her using communications spiritual items.

Everyone in the room tensed up.

Not even the magicians stopped Aili from moving.

She slowly reached over and picked up the receiver.

And she pressed it to her ear.

“What is going on? What the hell is going on!?” said someone over the phone.

“Explain the situation. We should have succeeded in everything!!”

“My country was destroyed! The temples, cathedrals, and personal spiritual items were all destroyed! The entire magical foundation was obliterated. It will take years to recover. Maybe even decades!!”

“…?”

“Dry, Dreada, Lact, Rinthia, Krokka, and everyone else want to speak with you. What happened? Is your country okay!?”

“It can’t be,” muttered Aili as she grew pale. “That spell wasn’t set to destroy London? Are you saying its coordinates were swapped out to use the ley line connections and destroy our pound economy countries instead!?”

Part 6

"It's over," muttered someone somewhere.

It was past two in the morning. Other than a major shopping district, all shops were generally closed at this hour, so most of London was wrapped in darkness.

"With the pound economy unable to function, England's international influence has dropped considerably."

Emilie Fordia, Aili Hexenphobia, and their group had not independently put together the London destruction spell which used St. George's fate.

It had been put together and then sold to them by this group that whispered in the darkness.

"Then let us begin the final battle with England as planned."

Everything up to this point had been in preparation for this.

The true battle had yet to begin.

CHAPTER 7

Part 1

In London's Buckingham Palace, an elderly woman wore a luxurious dress. With a look of annoyance, Queen Regnant Elizard once more listened to a recorded phone call. The actual call had happened only five minutes prior.

"Hello, hello, hello. After coming this far, it's hardly the time to be running or hiding, so I thought I would come out and name myself."

A knocking sound was heard there.

Elizard spread some papers out on the table and jotted down the necessary notes while listening to the clear voice: sex, estimated age, voice range, background noise, the slight nuances mixed in to the English words, etc., etc.

"I am Cynthia Exment. Perhaps you would understand if I said I'm the representative of the Royal Astronomical Research Organization. Well, England has grown so bloated that it has countless agencies and organizations, so the one and only queen might not be able to remember this one."

Personality, rises and falls in tone, which words were given respect, which were shown contempt, when the wording grew unnecessarily polite, and were it grew unnecessarily rude.

"I have a single objective. Your Majesty, you should know what that is, so do your best to stop us. Our blade is already pressed against your throat. Checkmate. Just one more move and we can knock you from the board. That is merely a means to an end, but we will not hesitate."

Female.

Early teens.

British English, but with some odd intonations here and there.

A cautious personality that wants others to think she is bold.

Has experienced some form of setback in the past.

Does not seem self-destructive. Believes there is a place for her in the world after this incident.

"This is an old country. It is old enough to have allowed the spread of the humiliating term 'British sickness'. At this point, history and tradition are toxins to this country. That is why we will overturn all that. Your Majesty, you will surely deem us evil, but you will also think that we might have been called heroes just to have some gear changed just a bit."

Heroic.

Sees a duality between good and evil.

After adding those notes, Elizard drew two lines through them to negate them. She wrote something else in their place.

Lacks a resolute individuality or is immature.

Hopes for approval from the masses. Believes good and evil can be justified by the majority.

"Now then, Your Majesty. History will begin to move by dawn. I cannot guarantee you will be there to see it, but we will bring the stage up to a new level. That is something you should have done."

The recording ended there.

Elizard added a new note to what she had already written, connected them with several lines, drew two lines through it to negate it, and wrote some more.

As she grew distracted and started doodling a cat and mouse, a voice spoke from the side.

It was one of the royal maids that looked after and protected the royals.

"The knights will be analyzing this as well. You need not spend your time on this."

"True. And if I dealt with every threat sent to the Royal Family, I'd never have time for anything else."

But this was a special case.

She spun around a valuable pen made by a craftsman with a Royal Warrant and she asked a question.

“Cynthia Exment of the Royal Astronomical Research Organization. Does that ring any bells?”

“No. We have requested the related documents, but I believe that agency is under the Anglicans’ jurisdiction.”

“What? The Anglican Church’s?”

She had assumed it was a group of people using huge reflecting telescopes on a tropical island, but it seemed they were using stars in a magical way.

“Your Majesty, it is already two. Please leave this work to the knights and the Anglicans so you can get some rest. This is not good for your health.”

“Two in the morning, is it? That isn’t the case in some of the pound economy. Some nations are approaching two in the afternoon on the other side of the globe. And they must be at a complete loss in that heat. Do we know the actual amount of damage?”

“Only that it was devastating on all counts. The spiritual items, temples, cathedrals, and all other devices making up the magical foundation were so thoroughly destroyed that detailed damage reports cannot be calculated out.”

“This is no laughing matter.”

As Elizard cracked her neck, the highly-mannered royal maid glared at her, but Elizard did not care. She then grabbed an old telephone made of pure gold and ceramics that looked like it belonged to a tea set.

“Who are you calling at this hour?”

“The British Museum.”

The concept of phone numbers was foreign to Elizard. Picking up the receiver immediately connected her to an operator, so she only had to speak the name of who she wished to contact.

While the operator connected her to the outside line, she answered the royal maid.

“The pound economy was taken out, but we can’t just lament that fact. Historical and valuable devices from around the world are gathered in the British Museum. Examples will be needed to rebuild and repair the lost magical foundation of those nations. The items in the British Museum can function as a decent backup in that way.”

The royal maid let out a slow breath.

Even if there were limits to the chain of command and the information she was privy to, the maid heard many different things in many different places. She was aware of the general situation. Those wishing for the independence of the pound economy had tried to attack London, but they had messed up their targeting settings (or had been tricked) and destroyed their own nations. The maid honestly felt the queen should ignore all that and think about her own health.

But the Queen Regnant would not have agreed.

And that was why the people were proud and glad to have been born in that nation.

“Be that as it may, this is still a large job. After allocating the specialists, we can’t avoid splitting off some personnel to pursue the enemy behind all this.”

Part 2

As time passed, the jewel’s curse eating into Itsuwa’s body faded away.

During the battle with Emilie Fordia, she had only been able to crawl with her arms, but she could now stand normally. She felt a bit unsteady, but she would be able to fight at high speeds with her spear.

But she did not look happy.

A report over the communication spiritual item had informed her of the situation surrounding the pound economy.

“More and more has been happening without us knowing.”

“That’s how most things are in the world,” said Tsushima next to her. “The most we can do is deal with the conclusion.”

She had been badly injured in the battle against the swordsman magician named Emilie, but the healing stone had been very effective. All her limbs were connected and not even a scar remained.

Itsuwa and the other Amakusas were headed toward London in the reinforcement vehicles the Anglicans had sent. However, they were not bound or monitored with clear hostility as before. That was most likely thanks to Freadia Strikers.

There had not actually been a real reason to fight.

She seemed to be the type of hound that fairly handled even the truths that were unfavorable to her.

“But we’re still in a bit of a gray area as far as they’re concerned. If they’re taking us to London without binding us…”

“They might just be shorthanded,” suggested Tatemiya in a low voice. “If what we heard is true, the pound economy’s magical foundation has been devastated. They can’t use any magic they can’t pull off empty-handed or with a wooden stick. Savage magic cabals might use this as a chance to attack the pound economy nations. Also, the loss of the pound economy will weaken the Anglican Church and increase their external risk. The queen will want to make a swift recovery even if it means ignoring her other official duties.”

They did not know to what level the spiritual items and temples had been destroyed, but they had been reduced to the magical equivalent of “a pile of rubble”. Rebuilding with no help would take years.

But they had heard that Queen Elizard was speaking with the British Museum.

If the “examples” preserved there were used to aid the rebuilding and repairing of the temples and spiritual times, that time could be drastically reduced.

However…

“If they focus all their energy on that, they will grow negligent elsewhere. The Queen Regnant is too heavily guarded to reach easily, but that may change in this irregular situation.”

“You think they’re trying to assassinate the queen? In the anti-magician headquarters of London?”

“It’s hard to say, but this Cynthia Exment had to have planned for the destruction of the pound economy. I doubt she would have ignored the Queen Regnant and British Museum’s ability to make a quick recovery.”

Whatever the case, the Anglicans needed as much help as they could get.

They had to restore the magical foundation of the pound economy, move personnel around for that purpose, reorganize security, and search out the person behind it all.

Itsuwa and the other Amakusas had been proven innocent in this series of incidents.

But they were not going to be tasked with repairing or rebuilding the pound economy where they would be able to physical approach the Queen Regnant. That would be no different from being made her direct bodyguards.

Which meant they would be given an outsider job that was important but nowhere near the Queen Regnant.

They would likely be asked to search for Cynthia Exment.

“In the end, this isn’t much different from before.”

“W-well, I’m much happier being the hound pursuing someone than a bodyguard waiting for an assassin that may or may not come.”

Part 3

Itsuwa and the other Amakusas made it back to London.

“We can finally walk boldly through the streets,” said Tatemiya in a small truck. “We’ll investigate the Royal Astronomical Research Organization, Cynthia Exment, and any other suspicious sounding terms. Itsuwa and Tsushima will investigate the scene of the call.”

“The call to Buckingham palace was made from a London phone booth, right?”

Itsuwa and Tsushima stepped from the back of one of the trucks parked on the side of the road and entered the late night streets. They both carried a large bag over one shoulder. Needless to say, they contained their dismantled sword and spear.

“But won’t the Anglicans have investigated this much?” asked Tsushima as her shoulders drooped. “Even if they’re busy protecting the queen who can’t move, they would be able to send *someone*. Anything they’re leaving to us will be something they’ve already checked on.”

“They may be using us to double check.”

When investigating an incident, it was standard practice for the same information to be checked two or three times to ensure nothing had been missed and nothing had been misheard.

And the Anglican Church was shorthanded at the moment. They would want to avoid any unnecessary work, so the less important but still unavoidable jobs would be forced onto the Amakusas.

At the same time, they avoided putting the Amakusas in a position where they could find some new information and hide it.

Freadia's opinion had changed, but there may have been someone else in the Anglican Church that did not fully trust the Amakusas.

"That's it."

Itsuwa and Tsushima approached a phone booth that seemed to have been forgotten where it sat next to a large and luxurious hotel. It seemed the extermination of pay phones due to cell phones was a worldwide phenomenon.

Tsushima picked up the receiver and found a slight bit of powder on it.

"It looks like they really have already read the residual information. The Anglicans aren't stupid."

"Tsushima-san, have you noticed all the cameras?"

Itsuwa pointed here and there in the scenery.

Street cameras, the hotel entrance, and the ATM installed in a building wall. Several security cameras were visible after just a quick look around. London had a network of hundreds of thousands of cameras, so there was no real escape.

However…

"People normally use public phones to prevent having the phone call traced back to them. In other words, they do it to hide their identity and location."

"But that would be meaningless here," spat out Tsushima. "It almost feels like she did it to show off her presence."

Itsuwa and Tsushima had not actually checked the security camera footage. If the girl had worn a mask or full face helmet, she could hide her identity from the cameras.

But someone speaking on a pay phone late at night with their face covered would look extremely suspicious. Using that as a safety measure would make one stand out even more.

It was best to assume she had made the call to Buckingham Palace while willing to have her identity known.

"Was it just a provocation? Or did she have a logical reason for it?"

"When the pound economy group tried to attack London, they put together a schedule that made it too late by the time the plan came to light. Of course, this Cynthia Exment did something to cause damage to the pound economy instead."

“Then was she simply declaring her victory?”

“I’m praying that isn’t the case.”

Whatever the case, Cynthia had remained perfectly hidden up to this point, but she had now made a phone call to declare war. It did not seem like a careless action. There had to be meaning in the timing.

“What do we do now?”

“The Anglicans will have used the security cameras and the residual information here to pursue the magician named Cynthia after she left here. How about we head that way too?”

At that time, Itsuwa’s cell phone rang. She felt oddly moved by the fact that she could readily use that collection of personal and locational information.

“This is Tatemiya. We’ve gone through the library’s documents and gathered a few pieces of information. Of course, it looks like the Anglicans have already been through this, so it just feels like wasted effort. If they already had the answer, why couldn’t they just give it to us from the start?”

“Calm down. An investigation requires double checking information.”

“Cynthia Exment is a 13-year-old girl. She is currently a British citizen, but her birthplace is not known. She’s an immigrant. She’s also what you call a genius girl, so she runs the Royal Astronomical Research Organization almost entirely on her own. She is currently in London, but she spends over two-thirds of the year moving between the observatories scattered around the world.”

“And what is the Royal Astronomical Research Organization?”

“Exactly what it sounds like.” Tatemiya paused for a beat. “It’s a research facility that the British Royal Family entrusted with investigating the laws of stars and space. It is of course a magic side organization. After all, the stars are important for our side what with astrology, summoning ceremonies, and the like. It isn’t surprising that they have a specialized organization for it.”

“Stars and space…”

That was a field with a lot of friction between the magic side and science side.

When either side took the initiative or developed a new spell or technology, it was questioned whether that violated the other’s territory or not. Magic and science had a treaty of inviolability between them, but new fields could often slip through the cracks.

Of course, if they had no way of resolving it peacefully, they could easily have been engaged in secret conflicts to forcibly eliminate each other's advantage. Cynthia's organization stood on the front lines between magic and science and it would have sharpened its fangs in the repeated battles that left nothing behind for history to record. The fact that it still survived meant it had extremely high combat skills.

"Right now, it primarily observes the movement of the stars around the world while also gathering, analyzing, and compiling the local legends related to stars and space. All that information is then reorganized into something that can help the Anglicans. …In fact, the true reason for the creation of the pound economy framework was so England could establish observatories around the world."

To use a concept from the non-magical world, it was similar to building a network of radar facilities for ballistic missile defense.

By constantly monitoring the arrangement of stars around the world, they could calculate the optimal time and locations for any ceremony from any religion. They could then predict the actions of those plotting to use those conditions for illicit purposes and they could cut off their actions ahead of time.

However…

"Does that mean Cynthia's group destroyed all of the observatories around the world that act as their headquarters and all of the spiritual items that symbolize their military strength and treasures?"

"Not only that, but there is no indication that they removed the important spiritual items beforehand. If they had done anything that large scale, the information would have leaked to the Anglicans. In other words, they truly did set fire to their own home. I don't know what they're plotting, but it must go deep."

Even if they won, they had nowhere to return to.

There was a Japanese saying about fighting with one's back to the water, but Itsuwa felt this was somehow different.

Cynthia's group had destroyed something they had not needed to destroy.

In fact, if they simply wished to do damage to England, they would not have needed to sabotage the spell that used St. George's fate. If they had let the pound economy people go through with their plan, London's magical foundation would have been destroyed.

They were clearly opposing England, but they had not attacked England.

They were part of the pound economy, but they had not hesitated to attack their own headquarters.

Everything was contradictory and it was not obvious what they hoped to gain. But after taking such a large-scale action, Cynthia had to have a large number of people who agreed with her. Massive amounts of time, money, manpower, and effort had gone into this, so Cynthia had to have something to make up for it.

But what was it?

Itsuwa felt as if they could not capture Cynthia until they knew what that was.

“I have one other piece of information, but it’s unconfirmed,” said Tatemiya.

“?”

“It seems Buckingham Palace has been receiving suspicious calls via embassies. I don’t know what about, but they’re supposedly from the Roman Catholic Church and Russian Orthodox Church.”

“You mean…”

“This is only speculation, but given the timing, the other churches must have caught wind of what’s happening. The queen is hardly going to openly speak about the destruction of the pound economy, but it will also cause a problem if her answer confirms it for them.”

“Yes, England wants to maintain the current power balance which includes the pound economy.”

“They’ve lost a part of their power and some might see this as an opportunity. If Cynthia isn’t caught and the pound economy’s magical foundation isn’t restored soon, this might spread beyond England.”

“What’s the time limit?”

“I don’t know. England has some decent diplomatic connections with Academy City, after all. Even if this is a good opportunity, another nation isn’t going to suddenly invade with a large army.”

But it could be assumed that the Royal Astronomical Research Organization had taken part in secret conflicts between magic and science over advantages obtained from stars and space. England’s connections to Academy City would not be strong enough to resolve all of this peaceably.

Itsuwa ended the call and turned toward Tsushima and her fluffy blonde hair.

“We have to hurry, but what we must do hasn’t changed.”

“We just have to capture Cynthia Exment, right?”

Part 4

Cynthia had called Buckingham Palace and named Queen Elizard. She had spoken as if she were planning some sort of destructive act, so it was predicted she and the Royal Astronomical Research Organization were attempting to do serious damage to England by harming Queen Elizard.

“The question is what the queen will be doing.”

Itsuwa and Tsushima walked along the path the Anglican pursuers had likely taken.

Tsushima let out a light sigh.

“They aren’t going to tell outsiders like us the details.”

“I know, I know.”

“But if they really are planning to quickly restore the pound economy, they’ll use the ley line connections and other magical connections between the British Museum and the pound economy nations.”

“?”

“Those nations are spread out around the world, right? If they went around to each one, repairing and restoring the destroyed spiritual items and temples, it would take forever.” Tsushima walked alongside Itsuwa. “The spell using St. George’s fate thoroughly destroyed the pound economy spiritual items and temples around the world. But the destruction of the objects doesn’t eliminate the residual information that there was an object there. Just as we’re tracing Cynthia’s path, that residual information can be read to draw up a diagram of the spiritual item or temple needing to be repaired.”

The memories residing in people and objects could be read more clearly the more recent they were.

That was why quick action was needed here.

But that alone was not enough.

“The British Museum has antiques from all over the world and some have great magical value.”

“There are likely some from the pound economy as well. When the details of the residual information are too vague, the examples left in the British Museum can be used to supplement the information. It would be like filling in the missing puzzle piece.”

It seemed England and the pound economy were magically connected with ley lines and other methods.

The spell using St. George’s fate had used those lines to spread across the pound economy.

Currently, the people in the pound economy nations could only use spells usable with no assistance.

In other words, they could not use the spells to bring out precise residual information or the spells to integrate the information from the examples in the museum and send that information back to the pound economy. The Queen Regnant would have to perform those spells in England and send them over the ley lines.

“Depending on how they’re used, those magical connections can be pretty dangerous. Attack spells can be sent from England to the pound economy without worrying about distance.”

“That’s why the pound economy leaders were so upset. And Cynthia used that outrage.”

As they spoke, Itsuwa and Tsushima followed the path already travelled by Cynthia and the Anglican pursuers.

They gradually approached.

Itsuwa’s phone rang once more.

She answered it while walking and Tatemiya gave a new report.

“The Anglicans have defeated Cynthia.”

Part 5

In truth, there had never been any chance of a real battle.

First of all, this was London, the headquarters of the Anglican Church which specialized in anti-magician activities. Their surveillance reached every nook and cranny, they had an overwhelming majority in usable troops, and each individual had great firepower. It

was a ridiculously ideal situation for them. Not even a top-class magician could just stroll through London while kicking away any obstacles in a head on fight.

And second of all, Cynthia Exment was a magician of the Royal Astronomical Research Organization and thus of the pound economy. She herself had thoroughly destroyed the pound economy's magical foundation of spiritual items and temples. And there was no sign of important spiritual items being transferred out beforehand. In other words, Cynthia was very nearly unarmed.

She had very little chance of victory in the first place and she had come with no preparations to fight.

It was obvious what would happen.

"Gbh!?"

As Itsuwa and Tsushima ran up, they heard the voice of someone with something sticky caught in their throat.

It came from a filthy area. The crumbling walls of brick buildings had been forcibly repaired with concrete, so there was clearly no concern for history or appearance here.

A short girl had been slammed against one wall and she slid down to the ground.

Her opponents were five or six Anglicans. They had surrounded Cynthia, but they were not all standing on the ground. For example, one was atop a road sign and one was clinging to the wall. Rather than just surrounding her in a 360 degree circle, they had formed a three dimensional semicircle.

It would be impossible for her to turn this around.

It would be impossible for her to escape.

"I don't like this."

"N-neither do I."

Itsuwa and Tsushima had followed the same path the Anglican's had. That was why they were able to see her cornered there.

Everything had worked out perfectly.

But that was exactly why they did not like it. This final enemy had caused them so much trouble, so would she really not have expected something so simple?

“Gh…gfh! Cough cough!!”

The girl held her gut with her small hands and curled up as she coughed.

It was clearly over.

And yet Itsuwa could not understand it. She could not settle down. She could not relax. A strange concern refused to vanish from her spine.

“P-pant! Gasp!! D-don’t worry, don’t worry. You aren’t at all wrong to think you’ve won. As you can see, I have no tricks up my sleeves. You’ve beaten me up and victory certainly goes to you Anglicans. Okay?”

She had planned for defeat.

In that case, they needed to assume she was still plotting something.

“(Is this a body double who has lost to give the real Cynthia Exment a chance to move freely?)”

“(Or maybe she’s letting herself be caught so she can sneak into an Anglican facility.)”

“Th-that’s not it. It really isn’t.”

They heard a light noise.

Cynthia held what looked like a wooden staff. It may have been a spiritual item, but it did not seem like much of a threat. It looked like something found at a souvenir shop. She herself had destroyed the powerful spiritual items and large-scale temples of the pound economy, so it was only natural that her equipment was weak.

But…

“*My plan is a lot simpler than that.*”

“…?”

“The destruction of the pound economy was sure to lead to this. It’s only because your higher-ups are being so slow that you’ve had a chance to beat me up like this. But it looks like those higher-ups have made up for the delay.”

(It can’t be…)

“Restrain her!” shouted Itsuwa. “Take that staff away!! Hurry!!”

But the Anglican magicians had already “won”, so they saw no threat. Itsuwa reached into the bag hanging from her shoulder. Putting together the spear would have been too much work, so she pulled out only the tip and threw it toward Cynthia.

♦

Meanwhile, Queen Regnant Elizard had left her residence at Buckingham Palace and travelled to Westminster Abbey. Naturally, this was not recorded on her normal schedule in order to avoid a sudden attack. She had chosen a small number of elites as her bodyguards.

Westminster Abbey was a cathedral with strong connections to the Royal Family. The coronation ceremony using the Curtana Second was held there and it was one of the better known royal graveyards, so that religious facility was involved with the monarch from the beginning to the end.

As Elizard walked through that cathedral, she asked a question of the royal maid next to her.

“How is the British Museum doing?”

“They have finished their preparations, so you can begin at any time.”

The British Museum’s important spiritual items related to the pound economy were being analyzed.

A spell was being constructed to extract residual information from the destroyed spiritual items and temples and to display them as diagrams.

Those two pieces of data would be transmitted from England to the pound economy nations through the ley lines.

The missing puzzle pieces in the extracted residual information would be supplemented with the data from the examples in the British Museum and a completed diagram would be created.

“What are the pound economy leaders saying?”

“They are all requesting support. It is obvious they will be in trouble if their final lifeline is cut here.”

As Itsuwa had thought earlier, they had felt it was unfair for England to have a system via the ley lines and other magical connections to unilaterally send magic to the pound economy nations. After all, that meant England could send large-scale attack magic to those nations at any time.

But that was why it had a bloodline safety mechanism that only allowed members of the Royal Family to use it.

That was why Elizard had arrived at Westminster Abbey which had such strong ties to the Royal Family.

“Let’s get this over with before the Russian Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church have any more pathetic suspicions. The residual information will degrade as time passes. Once enough time goes by, not even the examples in the British Museum will be enough.”

♦

It may have been the case that no one had made any mistakes.

It may have been the case that everyone had done their very best.

But the result was much too chilling.

“…!?”

A high-pitched sound burst out.

The thrown front of Itsuwa’s spear seemed to have been deflected by an invisible wall before it reached Cynthia.

“If they have made up for the delay, everything will be fine.”

She should not have had that power.

The staff in her hand should not have had much ability as a spiritual item.

Which meant…

“The queen is analyzing the examples in the British Museum, transforming that information into data, and transmitting it to the pound economy nations all over the world via the ley lines and other magical connections.”

The hints to this sudden reversal had been there.

England and the pound economy nations were magically connected, so England was prepared to send magic all over the world.

Yes, it was prepared.

In feng shui, mountains and rivers changed the flow of luck. By filling in lakes or carving down mountains to change the conditions, that flow of energy could be altered.

Which meant…

"I never needed some great spiritual item. Just this one small one was all I needed to obtain everything. All I needed was a spell to intercept and read the data the queen is sending through the ley lines! *Then I could get my hands on every single example inside the British Museum!!*"

With a sound like electricity entering an old cathode-ray tube, the cheap staff emitted light.

And the next thing Itsuwa knew, it had transformed into a large hammer. The change had looked somehow organic as if watching a tree growing on fast forward.

It was only then that a sense of danger caught up to the Anglican magicians surrounding Cynthia. They attacked her from every direction at once.

But it was too late.

"The British Museum." Cynthia was confident enough to smile. "The British Museum! I have everything that is stored there!! And with a spiritual item small enough for a single magician to hold in both hands!! Did you think you could defeat the world's greatest museum which is known as a magical arsenal!?"

An explosive noise burst out.

One magician was struck by the hammer and he was embedded halfway into a building wall.

One magician was knocked to the ground by lightning fired from the tip of a spear.

One magician was grabbed and dragged down into the earth by countless hands growing from the ground.

With each attack, the staff changed form with organic movements and produced a great variety of effects. It was ever changing. Itsuwa needed to gather as much information on this enemy as possible, but she felt her eyes starting to spin just by watching.

This was not normal.

It went beyond what she had expected.

Even Queen Elizard had been deceived and that staff had downloaded all the information on the valuable spiritual items stored in the British Museum. With just that one staff, how many spiritual items could she reproduce and how many types of magic could she use? It seemed foolish to even try to count.

“Now then.”

Itsuwa heard a thud.

The final Anglican magician had collapsed.

“I now possess the British Museum. Now that I have the exact same power, that collection of antiques cannot deflect my attacks. My next attack will burn down the British Museum. Without the examples, the pound economy will be forever unable to recover☆”

“…?”

Itsuwa frowned while staying on her guard.

“The British Museum?” she said without thinking. “Not the queen? Your main target was the British Museum!?”

“You thought I was assassinating Elizard? That would be a giant pain and it would accomplish nothing.”

She did not say it would be “impossible” or “difficult”.

She said it would be a “pain”.

(I just don’t see what she actually hopes to gain. She destroyed her own headquarters in the pound economy and she destroyed all of her valuable spiritual items and temples. She’s clearly picking a fight with England, but she isn’t attacking London or the queen which are the cores of the nation. What meaning is there in her mismatched actions!?)

“Now then. I have to head to a nice sightseeing spot.”

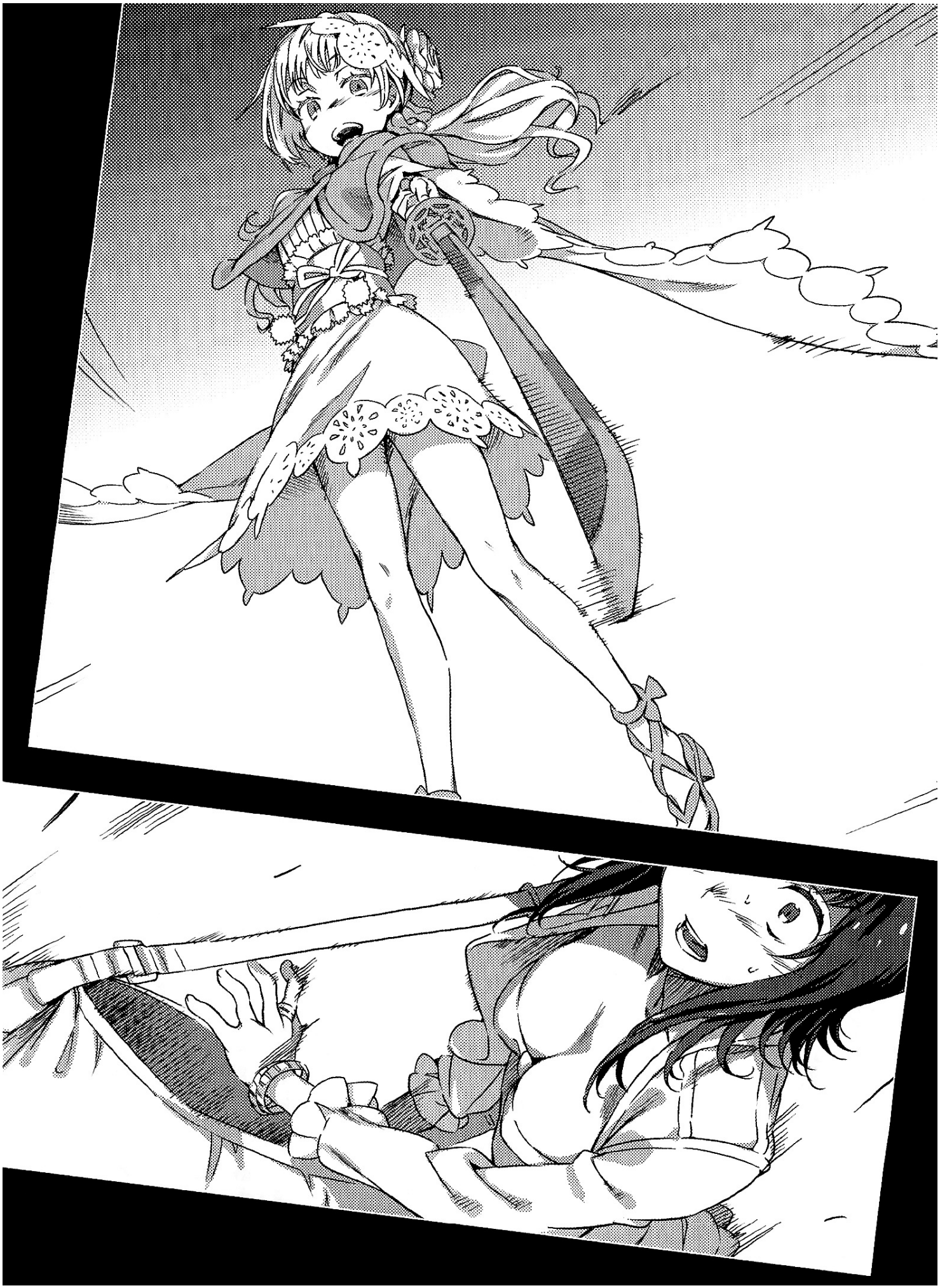
“…!!”

Her staff writhed smoothly and became a sword.

Itsuwa immediately reached into the bag hanging from her shoulder, but she then recalled that she had already thrown the tip of her spear at Cynthia.

She only had the handle left.

Also, she did not use simple spells. She would extract magical symbols from objects and construct spells from those. Those were the spells she used to defend against attacks she would otherwise be unable to withstand. The lack of the front end transformed the spear into a staff and completely changed its meaning.



“I have no real reason to let you live, do I?”

With a roar of thunder, Itsuwa was knocked to the ground.

Her vision flashed in and out.

The continuity of her memories grew vague. She could not feel pain. She could not even recall what had happened to her. She collapsed, rolled, and found herself staring up at London’s late night sky. As she lay on her back, she felt something warm on her stomach.

And…

After a moment, she realized what it was.

“…-san?” muttered Itsuwa in a daze. “Tsushima-san!?”

Tsushima was collapsed on top of her. She held a rapier in one hand, but it was broken partway down. She had at best taken most of Cynthia’s attack with her body.

Itsuwa’s spear was incomplete, so she could not handle Cynthia’s attacks.

Tsushima had held her rapier and could freely use magic, so she had tried to slice through the attack to cover for Itsuwa.

But she had failed.

However, she had made sure to protect Itsuwa despite failing.

Itsuwa frantically sat up. Cynthia Exment was already gone. She felt something wet on her hand. Tsushima seemed to be unconscious and her state looked bad enough that even shaking her would be dangerous.

Without wiping the blood from her palm, Itsuwa grabbed her cell phone and called Tatemiya.

“Tatemiya-san!! We have injuries in Lambeth’s business district! Everyone pursuing Cynthia except for me was taken out. I don’t know what system is used to transport magicians in London, but please send a rescue team right away! Hurry!!”

“Yelling isn’t going to get them there any faster. Calm down and give the exact location as well as the number and severity of injuries.”

But providing all the necessary information did not make the ambulance arrive any sooner either.

To fill the empty time, Tatemiya spoke.

“We’ve finally overtaken the Anglicans in our investigation. After digging through the library’s documents, we found some information they hadn’t found yet. It’s related to Cynthia Exment.”

“What is it?”

“Cynthia…or rather, the entire Royal Astronomical Research Organization scattered about the pound economy has been involved in secret conflicts between magic and science because the treaty does not cover the fields of stars and space very well. I explained that already, right?” Tatemiya’s words continued smoothly. “But in truth, Academy City and the science side are making great headway in the field of space development: a giant station with a residential area rivalling a small city, various types of space weapons, and recently there are even rumors of an elevator. They’re also using a large-scale particle accelerator to do research into the origins of the universe and using a giant radio telescope to observe the farthest reaches of space. The science side is overwhelming the magic side on plenty of fronts.”

“Then did Cynthia and her organization want to break free of that situation?”

It was a fair complaint, but it did not seem to match her actions.

How did that lead to picking a fight with England, destroying the pound economy, and attacking the British Library?

“No.” Tatemiya cut into her thoughts with a word of rejection. “To them, magic and science are both just as good as long as they can advance humanity’s space research. That’s why they had already given up. They had decided that continuing research on the magic side would reveal nothing new. And in that case, they felt they had only one choice.”

“And what was-…”

Itsuwa trailed off.

(It can’t be.)

“Are you saying they are trying to abandon magic to research space on the side of science? Is that why they destroyed the valuable spiritual items and temples in the pound economy? Did they see those as symbols of stagnation and restriction!?”

But that would never be allowed.

There was a clear treaty between magic and science. They had agreed to cooperate as long as both sides remained inviolable. Even if she abandoned her spiritual items and temples, Cynthia was still an expert magician. Her head was filled with specialized knowledge and techniques. She could not simply switch sides just because she wanted to.

“That’s why she didn’t directly attack London or the queen,” explained Tatemiya. “If the damage she caused was too decisive, England would have no chance to give up. She purposefully left behind their core so that they would have the leeway to surrender when they did not want to fall any further.”

“Surrender?”

“Yes. The nation of England would sell itself to Academy City, the headquarters of the science side. She is creating circumstances in which they will have no other choice. And as a citizen of England, Cynthia will automatically join Academy City and work for the science side. That will grant the Royal Astronomical Research Organization’s desire to perform space research from a scientific approach.”

The Roman Catholic Church and Russian Orthodox Church were starting to catch on that the pound economy’s magical foundation had been destroyed. Once they were sure, they would use various means to strip away England’s rights.

They would aid in the recovery in exchange for unfavorable conditions.

While the peace and communications of the pound economy were in disarray, they would cause destruction in those nations.

At first, they might not go as far as to actually attack the British mainland. But as an exchange of more sporadic attacks continued, they could escalate and ultimately cross a certain line.

If the Queen Regnant failed to quickly restore the pound economy, the only way to stop such a conflict on the magic side would be to work closely with Academy City and the science side.

Just as Tatemiya had said, they would essentially be “selling themselves” to Academy City.

“It looks like Westminster Abbey is in chaos as well. If Cynthia destroys the British Museum now, she will truly open the path to her ‘side change’. This will essentially eliminate the culture of magic from England. If anti-magician specialists join the science side, it will cause a huge change in the balance between magic and science. And a change that large could easily cause sporadic conflicts between magic and science around the world.”

“Yes…”

Itsuwa ran her hand through Tsushima’s hair as the other girl lay on the road.

And then she stood up.

There was nothing she could do by staying here. She ran across the road and picked up the end of her spear from where Cynthia had deflected it.

She assembled the spear and attached the blade.

And then she spoke.

“I have to stop Cynthia no matter what. This is no longer just England’s problem. I can’t ignore a selfish action that threatens to shake the entirety of the magic and science sides.”

CHAPTER 8

Part 1

The staff's ability was simple.

It changed form at its wielder's will. Similar legends could be found at all periods and in all parts of the world. Leaves turning to money, sawdust turning to gold coins, speaking what people were thinking, and seeing lost loved ones in smoke.

Sometimes they were done intentionally, sometimes they were done subconsciously, and sometimes they were done by a third party. It was not uncommon for that which is contained in people's hearts to show itself in some form.

In this case, the most notable aspect was the precision.

It was limited to the spiritual item in her hand, but the staff would freely change forms like a tree growing in fast forward. And those forms were weapons with various abilities based on the data she had received. In its neutral state, it was nothing but a stick, but Cynthia Exment had made it more valuable than gold with the data from all the examples in the British Museum.

The Queen Regnant had tried to quickly restore the entire destroyed pound economy.

By intercepting that data, Cynthia now held all the lost magic of the pound economy.

She was the pound economy.

She stood alone while bearing all the cultures of those nations.

"Now then," she said slowly with the staff resting on her shoulder.

She was the representative of the Royal Astronomical Research Organization which had spread across the entire pound economy. She was supported by all of the organization's members and they had even aided her in the planning stage. However, some of those who aided her might have complained if they saw her now. They might have said they never thought she would actually do it. They might have said she had not said she would cause such absolute destruction. Those who did not show themselves could easily change their opinion. They could conveniently think that they could still turn back.

But Cynthia did not care.

Those swing voters would turn back toward her once the situation shifted far enough her way. If the majority would side with the victor, she only had to grab victory with a thorough and fierce attack. Then everyone would support her.

And that did not only apply to the pound economy or the Royal Astronomical Research Organization.

It applied to England as well.

“History sides with the victor,” she said calmly. “That is why I pity you. I can view you in no other way.”

There were already several magicians collapsed on the stone-paved clearing in front of the British Museum. They had all been defeated by Cynthia Exment.

She did not think this was the most the Anglicans could muster.

During the one-sided fight, she had seen a few magicians abandoning their defeated comrades and fleeing. They had most likely been ordered to protect a target more valuable than the British Museum or the recovery of the pound economy.

The Queen Regnant and the Knight Leader who protected the royals had yet to show themselves.

The royal maids may have been physically holding the queen back, but it meant these defeated magicians had merely been the ones sent to protect the museum.

A threat great enough to defeat the museum could obtain something even more dangerous within the museum.

Faced with a threat like that, they wanted to preserve their best forces.

And as a result, the magicians sent to handle Cynthia had been…

“Below average,” she honestly judged them. “It seems they were trying to hold me back with numbers, but they do not seem to understand the situation. After absorbing the British Museum and the pound economy, my staff has even greater numbers. They would need to bring out every single weapon in the museum to stand on even footing with me.”

She smiled thinly and lightly shook the staff on her shoulder.

“So…”

She had defeated everyone there.

And yet she still casually turned around and spoke.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit late to come running up now?”

A single figure stood there.

That girl had arrived late.

Itsuwa of the Amakusa Christian Church held a spear as she answered.

“Do you really think I’m just going to give up?”

Part 2

They were 20 meters apart.

The flat, stone-paved plaza had nowhere to hide and nothing to use as a shield. The occasional streetlights could be torn to shreds by either one of them, so they could easily attack the target on the other side.

The inside of the British Museum might be different, but Cynthia’s objective was the destruction of the valuable spiritual items stored within. Itsuwa would gain nothing by running inside and guiding Cynthia there.

She would settle this here.

And with that thought, she heard Cynthia’s footsteps explode out as she charged toward her like a bullet.

She had no time to think.

She moved her spear with a motion as natural as covering her eyes from a powerful light.

Cynthia’s staff writhed smoothly and formed a single-edged sword.

Rather than tempered steel, it was a wooden sword with animal bone carved down like a razor blade attached. This created a sharp blade with no gaps.

Itsuwa’s spear did not move to block the horizontal slash of the bone sword that threatened to behead her.

Her instincts told her the sword would cut straight through the spear.

She instead jabbed the back end of the spear into the ground. Just like jabbing a long bamboo pole into the river bottom to move a boat along, she used the repelling force of the spear to leap backwards.

She heard the sound of the air being sliced.

After her first strike missed, Cynthia ignored controlling her balance and ran further forward.

She moved before Itsuwa had landed from her jump back.

She moved with overwhelming speed.

"...!?"

Itsuwa's feet were still in the air, so she could not evade with any normal method.

(If I can't move...)

Itsuwa strongly clenched her spear in midair.

Or rather, she clenched the attachment portion that let her disassemble it and carry it around.

(I have to throw off your aim!!)

She removed the spear's handle.

The bottom portion became something like a baton and she threw it with one hand. The throw did not need great force. As the object approached her face, Cynthia, swept the animal bone sword toward it almost entirely on reflex.

That gave Itsuwa a slight moment more.

And in that time, her feet landed on the stone. Rather than passively fleeing, she gathered great strength in her legs and swung her spear toward Cynthia. Rather than a jab, the spear moved in a slicing half circle. Cynthia had enough time to fall back after seeing the attack, but the tip of the spear caught slightly on the chest of her clothes.

If Itsuwa had not removed one portion of the handle and the spear had been at full length, that path would have sliced through a vital point.

"!!"

“!?”

With a clink, the baton-like part landed on the hard stone after Cynthia had deflected it with her bone sword.

That acted as the sign.

The second clash began.

(I can’t catch up.)

Itsuwa used complex footwork and extracted as many magical symbols as she could in the limited time available, but Cynthia was faster. Her staff became a round stone shield and deflected Itsuwa’s spear, it became a club and struck Itsuwa’s torso, it became a rainbow-colored bow and targeted Itsuwa as she fell back and tried to catch her breath.

(She has a human form, but it doesn’t feel like I’m fighting a human! Only the spiritual item in her hands is changing form, but it looks like her entire self is constantly in flux!!)

She was knocked backwards, but she did not stop herself and let herself collapse onto her back. That allowed her to just barely avoid the lightning-like arrow.

Her head was filled with confusion.

She was not simply afraid of her enemy’s strength.

Something did not add up.

(This is strange. She should only have free control over the spiritual item. You could call that a tool, a component, or a gear. I only have a spear, so her choices are of course far greater than mine, but she should have a weakness while switching between so many complex weapons!!)

Spiritual items were nothing more than tools used to assist in the use of magic.

Rarer ones would sometimes ignore the magician using them and they were wielded as the core of the magic, but the person was still essentially at the center. A human magician wielded the spiritual item and passed magic power through it to activate the spell using the necessary ceremony.

Different spiritual items were used in different ways.

Bicycles and cars were used differently. Scissors and knives were both tools for cutting, but they were held in completely different ways.

If Cynthia Exment was constantly changing the spiritual item she held, she would need to gather the proper magical symbols using different incantations, actions, directions, colors, numbers, constellations, ley lines, etc. To draw out all those different powers, she would need to make all sorts of slight adjustments.

Just because it started out as a single staff did not mean she could control all the spiritual items with a single unified ceremony.

But…

(I don't see her muttering any incantations under her breath. She hasn't been giving any mock offerings with paper dolls or charms. She's only been swinging the spiritual items around. That shouldn't be enough to establish a ceremony, so how is she weaving the magic into the fight!?)

Suddenly, Itsuwa's thoughts were cut off.

Her confusion increased further.

But not because she could find no answer. She had found an answer, but she had found it in an all too unexpected place.

"It…can't be…"

"Did you catch on?" asked Cynthia Exment while sticking out her tongue a little.

The weapon in her hands returned to the original staff and she rested it on her shoulder.

She had indeed been putting together various types of spells to match the spiritual items she was creating. It had simply been difficult to notice because she had not used any immediately evident incantations or offerings.

But magical symbols could be found all throughout everyday life.

For example, mythology was involved in the days of the week. Friday meant "day of Frigg" and Wednesday meant "day of Odin", so even completely different mythologies were present.

If one extracted those everyday magical symbols and constructed a spell, the preparations for the spell would not be evident at first glance.

The way one walked, the way one breathed, one's expression, the direction of one's gaze, etc.

If she was weaving magical symbols into the actions and mannerisms that naturally occurred in battle, she could carry out the optimal ceremonies for each spiritual item without giving an incantation or an offering. That would clear up all the confusion.

But…

That would mean…

“The Amakusa Christian Church’s Overseas Branch. That is the group I truly belong to.”

Part 3

Long ago, a small eastern island nation had no guarantee of freedom of religion and faith.

Due to the *fumie* and other forms of oppression, the religion symbolized by the cross had been overwhelmingly ostracized, belief in it had been considered a crime, and its followers had been executed. The details will be omitted here, but that was an era in which people were wrapped in straw and set ablaze.

“There was some resistance,” said Cynthia Exment lightly. “Some insisted on remaining in Kyushu and publicly opposed the oppression. Some felt that would lead to their extermination, scattered across Japan, and did their best to pass on their culture while in hiding. But the Amakusas went beyond that.”

“…”

“It may have been partially due to Dejima’s proximity. They also had an opportunity to contact the Dutch due to religious and cultural similarities. Whatever the reason, some of the Amakusas boarded the Dutch ships and tried to escape Japan and its continued oppression.”

“And that’s the overseas branch?” asked Itsuwa blankly.

Cynthia had blonde hair, blue eyes, and almost transparently white skin.

She also had a name that could only be spelled using the alphabet.

Itsuwa could not help but feel on an instinctual level that something was wrong with saying that girl had the same roots as her.

“But it would be hard to say that the world they found after escaping was a utopia. They were suddenly thrown into a culture that claimed all of mankind was equal yet had all sorts of publicly accepted discrimination.”

Society at the time had not been kind enough to happily accept some strange foreigners.

They had been unable to fit into that new society, but they could not return home either.

They had ultimately been forced to live in hiding.

They were no different from the Japanese Amakusas who had been forced to hide their religious signs and magical symbols in their everyday life to survive the harsh oppression.

Cynthia or those who supported her had been the same.

They had used the framework of the Royal Astronomical Research Organization to create bases around the pound economy nations. That may have been a result of their desire for a new land after finding no place for them in Europe and not being able to return to Japan.

“Space development doesn’t matter,” said Cynthia as if reciting the words. “We have no interest in switching between magic and science.”

She had silky and wavy blonde hair and she had a Western name. After working to blend into a new culture, that girl had adapted so much to that foreign land that her original form had been lost. And she now smiled thinly.

“We have only one goal. It does not matter how and it does not matter if it takes centuries. We will return to the country of Japan. That is what we truly desire.”

They had no place in Europe and they could not return to Japan.

After finding themselves in a place that was hard to call a utopia for strange foreigners, they had done their best to secure a place for themselves and to prove their value. However, that had trapped them in the bonds of the magic side.

Due to various circumstances, the oppression had left Japan and yet they had lost their path back.

And so they would do whatever it took.

Even if it meant destroying the magical foundation of the pound economy, even if it meant moving the country of England from the magic side to the science side, and even if it meant causing small scale wars around the world as the power balance between the two sides crumbled.

They would still return home.

“The involvement of Japan’s Amakusas was not actually part of the plan for this incident that began with the Anglicans’ free pass. That was a complete coincidence.”

A shadow fell across her smile.

It clearly came from something other than happiness.

“But it was an amusing coincidence. The Amakusas were behind it. Both truly and as the scapegoats! The Anglicans had the right of it from the beginning!! And then I took an interest in you who so happily escaped the very country we longed for. …Everything was backwards. We were polar opposites! Centuries ago, we were set up to trample that which the other longed for in order to reach the future we desired!!!!”

To complete her escape from Japan, Itsuwa had been attempting to protect England by crushing Cynthia’s desire to return to Japan.

To complete her escape from England, Cynthia had been attempting to do devastating damage to England by crushing Itsuwa’s desire to arrive in England.

They were complete opposites.

But they were also so very similar that others might view it as infighting.

“If you were acting based on a desire to return home, you should have realized sooner that everyone around the world will be just as sad as you if their homeland is destroyed!!”

“Say what you wish. I do not expect understanding from my opposite. I’m not half or even one quarter Japanese. So many generations have passed that you wouldn’t even find Asian traits with a DNA test. My name has changed so drastically that it can no longer be written with kanji! The language of my thoughts is written in the alphabet! People who laughed happily as they abandoned Japan could never understand my anguish!!”

Itsuwa slowly stood up.

Cynthia Exment picked something up from the stone-paved ground using one end of her staff. It was the piece of Itsuwa’s spear that she had thrown as a distraction. Cynthia skillfully tossed the baton-like part to Itsuwa as if it were a toy.

“Reattach that. I want to defeat you while you are at your best.”

“…”

Itsuwa took the piece and attached it to the bottom of her spear.

With a hard click, her spear returned to its normal length.

She had yet to come up with a secret plan she could use to defeat Cynthia.

This enemy had an ever-changing spiritual item that had taken in all of the British Museum and she could draw out overwhelming power using spells put together with the methods passed down by the Amakusa Christian Church. To harm her head-on, one would need an overwhelming number of troops armed with British Museum class spiritual items. From the beginning, this had clearly not been an opponent one could fight one-on-one.

But…

(If I'm defeated here, Cynthia will destroy everything inside the British Museum. The recovery of the pound economy will be delayed, Rome and Russia will apply pressure to England, and they will be forced to sell themselves to Academy City to survive. That has to be avoided! Cynthia's imagined future contains a severe nightmarish side she isn't seeing! I can't let her do this!!)

With repeated dry sounds, Cynthia's spiritual item changed form like a tree growing on fast forward.

It formed a single-edged sword made from a wooden sword with animal bone carved down like a razor blade attached.

If one ignored the material, it looked a bit like a Japanese sword.

To Cynthia Exment, it may have symbolized herself as her appearance, language, and name had gradually changed over the centuries.

"Here I go."

"What is the signal?"

Itsuwa sliced through a nearby streetlight with a swing of her spear.

The sound of the heavy piece of metal collapsing signaled the beginning of their clash from close range.

Part 4

In that instant, Cynthia Exment could see no reason why she would lose.

The difference in equipment was simply overwhelming. And she had arrived at the museum first, so Itsuwa had not had a chance to set any traps. And most importantly, Itsuwa was a fellow Amakusa. Even if she did set a trap, Cynthia would be able to read the signs.

In a pure clash of power, Cynthia would clearly be the victor.

That was not due to a difference in skill as a magician. It came before even reaching that level. It was an issue of how much preparation they had made for this one battle. Cynthia had spent years preparing for this while Itsuwa had happened across it and was adlibbing her way through it. There was too great a difference in experience points before they even stepped up on the stage.

Take a martial artist who hates to lose and suddenly throw him into the ring without telling him about the match in advance and he would be unable to fight as skillfully as normal.

He could not hope to stand up against the opponent who had been honing his body for that day.

And so…

(This might as well already be over.)

While charging forward, Cynthia accurately perceived her opponent's actions as if in slow motion. Where was Itsuwa targeting first and how would the path of her spear change if she had a plan B? She perceived all of those paths. She was confident enough to wonder which one the girl would choose as if playing old maid.

(Those puny attacks can never reach me!!)

Cynthia smiled thinly as she watched the spear stab low toward her chest.

She swung her bone sword after a delay.

But despite the delay, the bone sword reached the spear first.

She had completely overcome Itsuwa's speed.

And to symbolize that, her strike cleanly sliced off the tip of Itsuwa's spear. As a fellow Amakusa, Cynthia understood that spear was not just a weapon. As a spear, it had magical symbolism which could be used in her spells. After losing the tip and becoming a stick, she could not use her specialized magic.

But Cynthia Exment did not stop there.

She reversed the sword and immediately aimed for Itsuwa's neck.

♦

The conclusion was certainly not unexpected.

The end of the spear had been cut at an angle, but the sharp tip this left did not mean it could be used like a bamboo spear. It had lost its magical symbolism as a spear. The spear had formed the core of what allowed Itsuwa to cause phenomena normal people could not, so it would be difficult for her to continue fighting.

But Cynthia was not going to stop.

While maintaining the momentum of the slash that cut the spear, she targeted Itsuwa's neck.

She had created a perfect situation and would now take advantage of it.

It was just as she had announced.

(But I won't stop either!! I will find a strategy to reverse the situation. I will do whatever it takes to overcome her!!)

Cynthia Exment was not special. She was not the Son of God and she was not a Saint. She had only gained this tremendous power by sealing data on countless spiritual items inside the spiritual item she held.

In that case, Itsuwa only needed to reveal the secret of that power.

(A means of reversing the situation always lies within the enemy!! Magic is a technique for those without talent to catch up to those with talent. With the exception of the few spells that are directly related to innate talent, there is always a chance to catch up!!)

But the timing was too cruel.

Itsuwa only held a stick that had lost its tip and she did not have time to find a replacement.

And Cynthia's bone sword was accurately targeting her neck with the sharpness of a razor blade.

♦

And…

Cynthia Exment's eyebrows moved slightly at the final moment.

(What? She's acting oddly.)

A change came over Itsuwa's movements. She did not stubbornly try to block the sword with the stick that had been a spear. Nor did she desperately swing her head to escape the blade.

She took a large step toward Cynthia.

"…?"

Cynthia could not find any meaning in the action.

Whatever Itsuwa did, Cynthia's sword would remove her head. Unless she dealt with that, she could not attack Cynthia. No matter what action Itsuwa took, Cynthia was certain she could decapitate her. And even if Itsuwa tried to attack rather than defend, what could she accomplish? She only held a stick that could no longer be called a spear. Having lost her primary magical symbol, Itsuwa could not activate attack magic and that stick would not cause much damage when used as a normal weapon.

But…

But…

But…

With a loud clang, Cynthia's blade was stopped by Itsuwa's attack.

Part 5

"What?"

Itsuwa saw Cynthia come to a stop.

Her eyes were opened wide.

The two girls were caught in a struggle. Their weapons were locked together. *But that was not what had Cynthia Exment so surprised.*

She was surprised by what had caused it.

Itsuwa had only held a stick which could be all too easily sliced through, so how had she managed to stop Cynthia's bone sword?

The answer was obvious.

Even a child could tell why just by looking.

"Why?"

"Is it really that strange?"

"*Why are you holding the exact same sword as me!?*"

Yes.

Itsuwa had stopped Cynthia's sword using a wooden sword with animal bone carved down like a razor blade attached. It was the same as the one Cynthia had prepared to remove her head.

With their swords locked together, Cynthia pushed her sword forward and used the reactive force to jump back.

After swinging the sword once to secure a space, she swung the sword a second and third time. But Itsuwa swung her own bone sword at Cynthia in response to each of those actions.

"How… How did you get that!? You didn't have that sword before!"

"You have to ask? You didn't have a bone sword before either. You followed a certain set of rules using a staff and it transformed into one."

"…!?"

Cynthia suddenly realized that the remains of Ituswa's spear were gone.

Where had that stick gone?

Where had that object that could easily be viewed as a staff gone?

"It…can't be…"

Cynthia Exment's bone sword writhed smoothly and transformed into a stone axe. The stone axe transformed into a rainbow-colored bow. The rainbow-colored bow transformed into a trident.

Without the slightest time lag, she produced attack after attack with flowing movements, but Itsuwa did not hesitate. In fact, she stepped forward to close the gap between them. And the weapon in her hand changed form again and again to match Cynthia's.

"Did you get the British Museum's data somehow? No, that wouldn't explain it. That stick was nothing more than the remains of a spear! It was made completely differently from my spiritual item which is specially made to change form based on its user's will. The British Museum's data alone wouldn't let you use the same attacks as me!!"

"That's exactly right. I am not basing this off of the British Museum."

Cynthia had to be wondering how she had done it.

Itsuwa did not have the diagrams to copy from or the material that could change form.

So how had she produced the same phenomena as Cynthia Exment who had those things?

A round shield, a wooden club, a large hammer. Itsuwa's weapon continued to change form as she spoke from close range.

"I based this off your actions."

"...!!"

"How you breathe, how you walk, how you hold the staff, the timing of your attacks. ...After putting together those various spiritual items, you use the magical symbols hidden in everyday life to put together the actual spell just like I do. Rather than analyzing the internal structure of your staff, I analyzed the overall actions of my enemy. What I took from you were the spells you construct using your entire body. And I don't need to explain what theory lies at the base of this, do I?"

"Imitative magic. Rather than using magic to link the staff and your stick, you used magic to link me and you!?"

A scholar named Frazer had once divided the world's magic into two categories: infection magic and imitative magic.

In imitative magic, two similar objects would influence each other. If a doll was destroyed with a set process, the same destruction would occur to the body of the hated target. In the same way, churches decorated their roofs with a model of the cross used to execute the Son of God in order to receive the same divinity as him.

Magicians referred to this as Idolatry Theory.

"If you had been born with something special like the Son of God or the Saints were, I would not have been able to correspond closely enough to you."

While stepping in for an attack, Itsuwa's stick writhed smoothly and transformed into something else.

It became a sword of wood and bone.

"But even if you have absolute attack power, you yourself are not special! Magic is a technique used for those without talent to catch up to those with talent!!"

"Even so!!"

With a clang, Cynthia Exment stopped Itsuwa's bone sword and shouted out.

At some point, she had started going on the defensive.

“If you could interfere with anyone you wanted like that, magicians wouldn’t have to work so hard! You couldn’t have caught up with my spell just by mimicking my actions!!”

“True. About the only person who could have done that with no preparation would have been Crowley who was known for his ability to spiritually knock people to the ground.”

Itsuwa grinned.

She was confident enough to smile.

“But we’re both Amakusa. When you get down to it, we take the same actions in whatever we do. I didn’t need any strange creativity. As long as we are pouring our all into mindlessly swinging a sword, we would naturally end up in the exact same place!!”

They were both Amakusa.

No matter how far their paths had diverged, they were the same deep down.

And that was why they had lined up.

How had that sounded to Cynthia Exment whose appearance, language, and name had all gradually changed beyond recognition?

She was a Japanese person who did not look Japanese.

She had always looked down on herself.

“I will return,” she groaned. She transformed her spiritual item to the same bone sword as Itsuwa’s. “No matter what. No matter what!! For well over a hundred years, my ancestors have constantly fled while dreaming of a utopia. All that time, they have desired to return and I will make sure that happens no matter what!!”

“Reality is always harsh.” Itsuwa let out a slow breath and held up her bone sword. “Now our power is even. The number and strength of our weapons will not decide this battle. This comes down to the skill we have built up and our own mental strength. If you wish to declare victory, do so after defeating me.”

“Ohhhh

Because they were equal, not even dozens or hundreds of strikes would resolve the battle.

The simple concepts of skill, numbers, and equipment no longer applied.

Only a fool would enter a battle based on mental strength without giving a thought to their opponent's strength.

But when all else was equal and the cup of equality had been filled to the point that surface tension was barely holding the water inside, it was mental strength that showed itself in the very, very end.

"I have...!! We have been restricted for so very long! That is why we will destroy all of those bonds. We will return to our original country!! It doesn't matter what we must crush underfoot on our way there!!"

"Even if that method did bring you home, you would not be able to rest. You would find nothing more than a perfectly normal land no different from any other and intense guilt over all the blood you shed to reach it!! No matter what anyone says, you have strayed from the proper path!!"

A saving hand for the unsaved.

The magic name of a certain Saint floated up in the back of Itsuwa's mind.

The ideal form of the Amakusas was to protect people from having their cities, nations, and peaceful lives taken by this magician.

And...

They should also never abandon this magician who felt this was the only way to save herself.

So...

"The Amakusas should continue fighting to protect the people's smiles no matter where we might live! If you have forgotten that, I cannot agree with you no matter what you might say!!"

With their blades still locked together, Itsuwa swung back her head and slammed it into Cynthia Exment's forehead.

Cynthia staggered backwards and Itsuwa attacked again without a moment's delay.

She used the bone sword's guard.

She poured all her strength into this final attack and smashed the guard into the bridge of Cynthia's nose as if using brass knuckles.

Part 6

The threat had been eliminated.

After collapsing, Cynthia had been taken somewhere by the Anglican magicians. She had been acting as the representative of the Royal Astronomical Research Organization, but it was unclear who exactly had been working with her. She needed to be questioned to determine how far the Amakusa Christian Church's Overseas Branch had infiltrated the Anglican Church.

Itsuwa was waiting in the stone-paved plaza in front of the British Museum.

The beginnings of dawn were already showing themselves.

"Honestly, that was a terrible entrance exam," said Tatemiya.

Itsuwa turned toward him.

"How is Tsushima-san?"

"Her life isn't in any danger. She's a professional, so she's rational enough to worry about her own vital points even when heroically covering for someone."

Itsuwa could never thank her enough.

Not only had she directly saved Itsuwa's life, but she had allowed Itsuwa to continue on and safely end the incident.

"Our enemy and allies were Amakusas…"

"Yeah, I won't deny that fate took a weird turn there, but it isn't worth anything more than that," said Tatemiya offhandedly. "But before we begin talking about Anglican or Amakusa, we're all Christians. If we walk around the city, we can find all sorts of colleagues. If you forget about that and think on too small a scale, you'll fall into the trap of yearning for home."

That may have been the case.

But they and their ancestors had likely lived through an era harsh enough for them to forget something so simple.

But whatever the reason, a crime had to be punished.

Even if one wanted to save Cynthia Exment and her group, it would not be easy.

But…

(I need to become the kind of person who thinks that makes it all the more worthwhile.)

Itsuwa thought silently.

Now that she had gotten involved and brought this to an end, Itsuwa had to pay attention to what happened to them afterwards. And it did not matter if that took years.

She changed her train of thought and asked a question.

“By the way, what is going to happen now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Both our enemy and allies were Amakusas. Even if we resolved the incident, we might be accused of not managing our sect properly. We might be blamed by association. Can we really join the Anglican Church now?”

“Oh, about that…”

Tatemiya trailed off there.

And he turned around.

As dawn crept into the sky, someone in a wheelchair approached them. It was a magician of Necessarius, the Anglican Church’s 0th Parish. It was Freadia Strikers. They had clashed several times during all that had happened, but she had ultimately risked herself to defeat the enemy magician who had taken both Anglican and Amakusa hostages.

She wore bandages here and there, but the unsettling blackened skin was gone.

She had a slight smile on her lips and she tossed something toward Itsuwa.

It was a silver and red rosary.

That was the symbol of the Anglican Church. A nun named Orsola Aquinas had been given the same thing when she had been welcomed to London.

Being given this by a Necessarius magician meant one thing.

“Yes, that is more valuable than your life, so don’t lose it,” said Freadia Strikers from her wheelchair. “Based on your results here, the Anglican Church has officially acknowledged the usefulness of the Amakusa Christian Church. We look forward to working alongside you as you wear that silver and red cross.”

The long, long special entrance exam was finally over.

Itsuwa and the others wanted to take a shower, climb into bed, and get some sleep, but after that, the sun and the streets of London would welcome them.